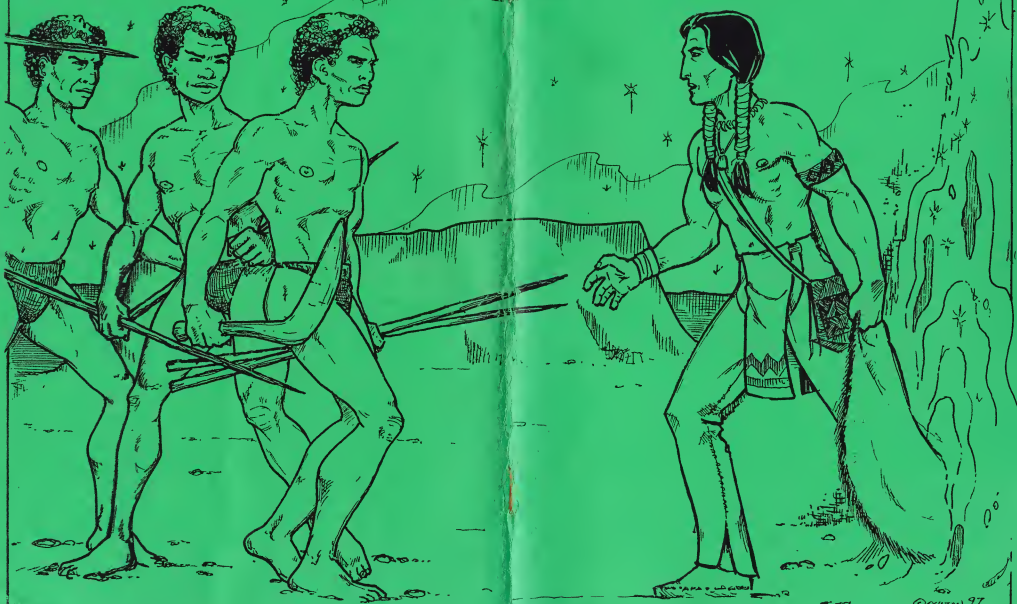


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Bardic Runes XV

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BARDIC RUNES XV

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RUNEFOLK

Much appreciated proofreaders are Carl Mills, Catherine Woodgold and Henry McLaughlin who continued his work on computerization and design.

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Deepest appreciation to all involved in the widespread geographical diffusion of this magazine, especially Grant Duff.

Those who contributed fiction and poetry are listed above as well as at the back.

BARDIC RUNES

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BARDIC RUNES

"My Lady," the magician he did say,
"The Bardic Runes can be found thataway."
"Bardic Runes, magician, are legends foretold?"
"Aye, my Lady, stories to unfold."
"Then these Bardic Runes I wish to hear."
"Aye, my Lady, your wishes are clear.
Myths and legends abound within.
They tell of foreign lands.
For Bardic Runes can be found
Through the gates of the Golden Sands."
"Press on magician," I did say,
"We have a long way to go,
Over the hills and through the forests
Where the gates of the Golden Sands glow."

We rode for many a long day,
And all through the night
Until one early morning sunrise,
We saw a stone wall and a glorious sight!
For as far as the eye could see
Were temples and gardens in gold and green.
The gates of the Golden Sands stood open,
With beckoning hands unseen.
We urged our mounts forward,
Deciding not to wait.
A Bardic priest greeted us warmly
At the open doors of the Golden Gate.

He took our mounts and led them away.
We wandered around in awe.
We found a priest in the gardens,
And he quietly explained the Bardic law.
He sat us down amidst the flowers.
Myths and legends he sang to us, in many tunes.
He then showed to us all the splendid temples,
And spoke of the stories of the Bardic Runes.
Now here I speak to you of those stories,
And the many myths will now unfold.
Legends in all their glory
Are now ready to be told.

Jeanny Driscoll

HEARTROCK

T. William Carter

It was another long drop. The rock bridge he was running across was a narrow one, but Bone had other things on his mind. He'd all but completed his assignment, a genuine quest. In the chamber beyond the bridge sat the HeartRock, the prized jewel of the people of Daggen, and the current apple in the King of Lancerin's eye.

Bone heard the ruffling of leathery wings in the dark pit on either side of him, but paid them no mind. He raced into the chamber and approached the HeartRock's cradle.

The HeartRock was a fist-sized diamond that had an eerie silver wave that swished back and forth inside it. It was said that this silver wave was its magnificent core, one that was alive and desperate to be free. It was also said that it had power beyond understanding or control, that it could topple gods.

Bone paid little mind to such legends. He chose instead to believe what he had learned of the Rock's history. According to his research, the HeartRock had been used in battles as a magical tool that greatly augmented the weapons of its wielder. Other magical properties had been suggested, but Bone had found no historical record to back those claims up. Either they had been myths, or else no one had lived to write the truth down.

Either way, Bone knew what he had to do. He reached into his furry anorak and pulled out a special sack, the one given him by Magics and Potions for this mission. As he did so he reflected on the sheer lunacy of this assignment. Lancerin didn't need the HeartRock. It had plenty of its own magical gems and weapons. And there were many fully skilled wizards under the king's employ. And Bone could not but feel a certain embarrassment on being sent on a quest. His job was to protect the kingdom of Lancerin, not to go questing about the lands for hidden treasure and magical rocks.

Worse still, the kingdom of Daggen would not look favourably upon what could only be seen as a theft of its property from within its borders. Such an act could spark a war between it and Lancerin. By completing his assignment, Bone reflected, he was actually putting his kingdom at risk.

Bone was a soldier, however, first and foremost. He followed orders and liked them. And ever since he had rescued the king from death at the hands of an assassin in the town of Runtwarm, he had been the king's personal choice for this assignment.

Grudgingly, Bone opened the bag. The HeartRock contained incredible magical powers, powers that were as unpredictable as they were fantastic. To prevent any danger to Bone and those around him, he had been given a magically treated bag that would contain the Rock's powers the way an orb contained the powers of a mage. Holding the bag open in his hands, he advanced towards the cradle.

He stopped a moment, a mere inch in front of the swirling gem, and considered what he knew of these places. He'd heard the legends of heroes who had quested into dark caverns or old castles searching for a mystical object that would grant them fame and power, only to trigger some booby trap and have the entire place crash down upon them. Bone looked carefully, and could just make out a stream of near-invisible energy that came down from the ceiling and coated the gem. Bone knew with all certainty that if he took the HeartRock from its cradle, he would trigger the booby trap and the entire mountain was likely to collapse.

He swiped the rock into the bag in one swift motion and was out of the room before the rumbling began. He was halfway across the bridge when he saw he was not alone.

It was a troll, not one of the arctic trolls that lived in these parts, but a lower kingdom troll, one whom Bone knew only too well.

"You've come a long way to die in the cold, Bone," the troll said.

"That makes two of us," Bone replied. "What are you doing here, Brakit?"

"Following you," Brakit replied. "Waiting for you to do the hard work for me." He looked around, noticing the tremors that were getting stronger with each passing second, seeing the rocks and chunks that were falling from the ceiling and into the pit below. "I see you've been busy."

"Part of the job," Bone said dryly, "as well you know."

"Give me the HeartRock, Bone," Brakit said. "We haven't much time, and you know you can never best me. You never could."

It was true. Bone remembered his days in training, of how he had lagged behind the others because of his elfin size. And of all the trainers that had come in to prepare them for the Lancerin Secret Service, none had been harder on Bone than Brakit.

The tremors increased, and the bridge started to crack. Bone knew it would be gone moments later, and there would be no way out. Still, the troll was blocking the other side of the bridge. He was already trapped. He needed a third option.

He looked down, and saw for the first time what he knew were flying around inside the pit: arctic fur dragons. These were beasts who lived in the mountain regions of the north. They were three meters from tail to tooth with thick fur to protect their scales from the cold. They were flying out of control, trying to avoid the falling rocks from above. One flew near, and Bone saw his chance.

Without warning, Bone leapt into the void and fell ten metres, only to land heavily on a dragon's furry back. The landing had been bad and Bone rolled off, but managed to catch hold of a clump of fur on its left side. The beast screeched and swung its head around to deal with the intruder. It tried to scrape at him with its hind leg.

Brakit had been too surprised to react, and had watched incredulously as Bone plunged. Now he watched as his old enemy scrambled onto the dragon's

back and slipped a rope around its throat, using it as a makeshift rein, just the way he had trained him with regular dragons, all those years ago. And Brakit remembered it had been after one of those sessions that Bone had caught two other trainees with a bag of gold that had been lifted from the Lancerin treasury wagon. Bone had put two and two together and realized that only Brakit could have known the significance of the cart and its contents. The two trainees each had a hand cut off, but Brakit himself had escaped his execution.

And he had been waiting a long time for revenge. Brakit took a running leap out into the pit and caught hold of a dragon's tail.

Bone, clinging tightly to his dragon's neck, worked hard to get the beast under his control. It fought him, but he could feel its will slipping. It ought to. He had been trained well. A large chunk barely missed the two, and Bone looked to see where it had come from. Up above, there was a hole in the chamber, one that was just large enough for an arctic dragon and a passenger to get through. Bone pulled on the rope, trying to angle the dragon upwards. It responded, and the two began to climb.

Bone looked back quickly over his shoulder, hoping to see Brakit crushed under a large chunk of rock. There was no such luck. Brakit had his own dragon, and was right behind him. Bone ducked his head, and he and his dragon soared out of the chamber and into the frigid air beyond.

The chamber of the HeartRock had been built inside a mountain in the frozen wastes of Daggen, a month's journey from the borders of Lancerin. As Bone raised his head to look around he saw the Daggen castle, etched into the side of a mountain a few slopes away. And he could just make out a team of Daggen warriors in the valley below, pointing up at him and shouting. They would be trouble if he landed anywhere near them, Bone knew, and he turned his dragon away.

As he did so, a jet of flame just missed him. The heat singed the left side of his face, and his anorak caught fire. He had to grip his reins in one hand and swat at the flames with the other to put them out. As he did so, he stole a glance behind him.

Brakit was coming. He had his dragon fully under his control, and was able to make it breathe fire on command. That was something Bone hadn't mastered. He saw the dragon rearing its head back for another blast, and he quickly pushed his own dragon into a dive. The flame lashed harmlessly across the inflammable skin of the dragon's tail, damaging only the fur, as it dove straight down towards the slope of the mountain.

Bone pulled the dragon out of the dive at the last moment, and it swooped along the treetops that lined the mountain's lower half. The snow-covered peak of the mountain had completely crumbled now, destroying the maze of traps and chambers inside. Bone looked around for Brakit, but could not see his enemy behind him.

A sudden burst of flame caught his dragon's wing, startling if not harming the beast. Bone looked up, and saw his enemy above him. And he was close.

Close enough for crossbow fire. Bone snapped out his collapsible crossbow and fired a bolt, but the quarrel bounced harmlessly off the dragon's hide. In a second he reloaded and fired again, this time aiming for one of Brakit's feet. Bone cursed himself as the quarrel bounced off that as well; the creature was a troll, made of living rock! How could he have been so stupid?

"That wasn't your best, was it, Bone?" Brakit mocked. "You always did come up short." He pointed his dragon's nostrils at Bone and made it breathe fire once more.

Bone swerved his dragon to the right, aiming it on a course up the side of the mountain. Brakit pulled his to follow, keeping his position above him.

Bone knew he was running out of options. His dragon could not keep flying forever, and when it tired Bone would be at Brakit's dragon's mercy. Or perhaps Brakit would come after him himself. He had said at his trial how it would be his pleasure to kill Bone with his bare rocky hands. Bone realized that nothing short of divine intervention could save him.

Or magical intervention. Holding his crossbow in his teeth and holding the reins in his right hand, he dug his left into his burnt coat and pulled out the bag containing the HeartRock. It had been used to amplify magically the power of weapons. It might also contain powers beyond even a wizard's control. And Bone was no wizard.

A jet of flame made his mind up for him. He opened the bag, breaking the spell, and pulled the magic rock out. They were flying over the still crumbling mountaintop now, and Bone could feel his dragon tiring. If he was going to act it had to be now. He looked over his shoulder to see where his enemy was, then pulled his dragon into an arc and flew straight up.

As he did so, he gripped the dragon around the neck with his legs and spat his crossbow into his hand. Holding the HeartRock in one hand and the crossbow in the other, he leaned back until he saw the look of surprise on Brakit's face and fired.

The quarrel blazed through the air like a fireball and hit the surprised Brakit squarely in the chest. The force of the bolt knocked him right off the back of his dragon, and sent him tumbling down into the rocky mess that had once held the HeartRock. Bone put his weapons away while the dragon righted itself, then held on as it flew down towards the treeline.

The furry dragon landed, then curled up for a nap. Bone envied it; it would be a long time before he would be able to sleep. All his supplies were back with the dogsled on the other side of the mountain, and he would have no time to get them. The Daggen team was sure to have seen where he went down.

That wasn't what really worried Bone. He was worried about the HeartRock. Now that it was out in the open its magic was uncontained. He could not stick it back in the bag, as the spell Magics and Potions had placed upon it had been released. They had been very specific about that warning. And though Bone didn't believe the legends about the magic Rock, he was intelligent enough to take their warning seriously.

Bone put the HeartRock into the pocket of his damaged anorak and

headed off in the direction of Lancerin.

RUNIC SCRIPTUM

RUNES\TILL\RAGNAROK\ERECTED\HERE\ON\THE\DAY\
OF\TYR\AT\SUMMER\SOLSTICE\ON\ICELAND\AT\THE\NINTH\
ALLTHING\MEET\|BY\THE\MAGIC\GAINED\BY\ODIN\HANGIN
G\FOR\NINE\DAYS\AND\NIGHTS\AS\LEGACY\TO\MAN\THIS\E
NGRAVED\STONE\PROTECTS\HER\WHO\LIES\ETERNAL\BESIDE
\IT\FROM\ALL\EVIL\|HERE\LIES\SILKISIF\THE\BETROTHED\OF
\THORVAL\KILLED\IN\YOUTH\BY\THE\BLUE\HAZE\|HER\BUR
NT\ASHES\SOWN\TO\THIS\DELL\SO\MAKING\IT\HALLOWED\G
ROUND\WHICH\SHALL\NOT\BE\DESECRATED\IN\ANY\FORM\
\MAN\OR\BEAST\DOING\SO\SHALL\BE\CURSED\ALONG\WITH
\THEIR\LINE\FOR\ETERNITY\BY\THE\MIGHT\OF\THE\INVISIBL
E\RUNES\ETCHED\UPON\THE\BOTTOM\OF\THIS\STONE\|MAY
\SILKISIF\WAIT\IN\PEACE\AND\HAPPINESS\WITH\FREJA\AT\SE
SSRUMNIR\HALL\TILL\I\JOIN\HER\AT\FOLKVANGER\WHEN\T
HE\NORNS\HAVE\CUT\THE\THREADS\THAT\TIE\ME\UNWILLI
NG\TO\MIDGAARD\|IN\THORVAL\

D. Sandy Nielsen

SMORAG'S TALE

Kate Tompkins

The dwarven woman sat on a stone bench outside her cottage, enjoying the late afternoon sun as she smoked her pipe. Vivid blue eyes, the colour of the hollyhocks growing to either side of the gate, squinted out from a wealth of wrinkles. Her great-grandson, Kennett, a young dwarf just sprouting his first beard, stood before her, along with a dozen other youngsters from the village. "Old One," he said, "we have a question."

"So. You have a question. And perhaps I have an answer. We will never know if you do not ask it."

He shifted nervously from one foot to the other. Taking a deep breath, he blurted out: "Other dwarves live in caves underground. Why does our tribe live in houses out in the open?"

"Why indeed?" she said, taking another puff on her pipe. "Listen then, and I will tell you a story." The children dropped to the ground and sat in a half-circle around her, waiting eagerly. Stories were always good, and Smorag's were better than most. She waited until they were all comfortable, then began. "When I was a little girl, a time farther back than any of you can imagine, we lived in the

rock faces to the east of here, in what we now call the barren lands. Such caves were there! Every family had two or three to call its own, and there were kitchens and workshops, and storerooms bursting with good things besides.

"Derwent was king over us. Aye, we were numerous enough to have a king. He ruled from a magnificent throne room formed from a vast natural cavern. It had a huge central aisle of multicoloured pillars made up of joined stalagmites and stalactites, glistening wetly in the light from hundreds of torches. The walls were covered by mosaics of gold and precious stones, interspersed with elaborate tapestries of hunting scenes and battles. The entire history of our tribe was on those walls for all to see.

"At the far end of the cavern several stalagmites formed a massive heap. Steps had been carved out of them, leading up to a golden throne. There Derwent sat, administering justice and supervising the merrymaking. Plenty of food and drink there was in Derwent's court, and music besides.

"Our people thrived. There were rich veins of ore in the rock, and even gemstones, and we mined them all. As the tunnels went deeper, a particularly productive vein of pure silveron was discovered, causing great excitement.

"We began to mine the silveron. At first, all went well. Some of the miners talked about a vague sense of unease, a feeling that something was watching them, but no-one saw anything. Then the dreams began."

Smorag paused. She took a few more puffs on her pipe. An experienced teller of tales, she knew when she had her audience captivated.

"It was the children to begin with. They'd come crying to their parents, saying something called to them in their dreams, begging them to free it. Then the miners had night visions of a vast treasure trove hidden behind a wall of silveron, with jewels beyond imagining waiting for whoever breached the wall.

"Word of these events came to our Wise One, as such things will. He travelled the dreamways deep into the rock, seeking the source of the sendings. For a day and a day, and yet three days, he lay on his bed without moving. We feared that we had lost him. At last, he opened his eyes, and called the king and the council into his room.

"'A great and ancient evil lies imprisoned in the stone below us, caged in with walls of silveron,' he told them. 'It is this that calls to our people, seeking release. It has no body of its own, but what it can fabricate from our dreams and imaginings. Dreams and fantasies are its meat and drink. We must abandon our workings, and close our tunnels with portals of iron. Only then can we live in safety here.'

"Derwent promised that it would be done, and sent word to the smiths to begin building the doors. Powerful runes of warding were placed on them,



barring evil from passing through. With the doors in place, the ominous sendings stopped." She sighed. "And there the story should have ended, and would have, but for the greed of our people.

"There are few dwarves who can resist the siren call of buried metals. We are children of earth. It is in our blood. The Wise One died. Thoughts returned again and again to the treasure beneath us. There were those who went through the iron doors, thinking that surely a little silveron could be taken without breaching the wall and releasing the evil that lay behind it.

"The wall was breached, no one knows by whom. The seekers after treasure continued. There was always a reason: a dowry to be won, a fortune to be made, a need for silveron to fashion a suit of armour for a young dwarvish prince. Most of the seekers never returned. Some did. Not all of them came back sane.

"From the tales the survivors told, we pieced together what we know of the dreamstealers. If they could enter our dreams, our thoughts, they could take us over, keep us dreaming. They needed our dreams to give them a physical presence.

"Some of the survivors had to be killed. They were walking dreamers, their souls long gone, replaced by the dreamstealers. Derwent's son was one such. We left the caves for good after we buried him." Smorag was silent for several minutes. Finally, she continued. "It is very hard to kill that which bears the face of someone you love. Promise me now, each of you, that you will stay out of the barren lands."

Solemnly, each child made the promise, then went home in search of friendly faces, laughter, and supper. Kennett and Smorag were left facing each other in the half-dusk.

"Do you ever think of revenge, Old One?" he asked.

"How avenge myself against something that has no body and cannot be killed?"

He thought for a while, then shook his head. "I don't know."

"But I do. You can help me with my vengeance, Kennett, if you will."

"What can I do?" he said eagerly. One hand lovingly touched the blade of his axe.

"So quick to fight, the young. So quick to die. That is not the way. I am old. I have told my tale to four generations of children. You may be the last. Pass my story on and my vengeance may live after me."

"I don't understand," said Kennett slowly, the fires of heroism fading from his eyes.

"Each passing generation is my vengeance. While we live safe and free, the dreamstealers wait futilely in their cave for release. Think of an eternity passed starving in the cold and the dark. Endless lifetimes of nothing but blackness. No food, no companionship, no hope. For four generations, my tale has kept the dreamstealers in their prison. Oh yes, I think often of vengeance, and get it."

GAVARED'S QUANDARIE

Hold, good mye neighbour, sit bye mie,
And hark to mye perplexitie.
These many moons, and happilie,
Mye Lady's Court concerneth mie.
Forsooth! What finer Chivalrie
Than homage to mye Lady biel
And yet mye Pater, properlie,
Wills mie study fittinglie,
To be a scribe, or seer like hie,
Or ryde a charger manfullie.
Hicius docius, woe is mie,
Star-crosst twixt faith and loyaltie.
Fiddle mie, riddle mie, foe fye fie,
Raise ye now a glass with mie,
And, good mye neighbour, sing with mie
Of Gavared's endless quandarie.

(Hark, good Michael, I was taught
To Tee the cross and Eye the dot.
Mye poesie I fear is naught.
Tis aye wi'anachronisms fraught.
At U. of T. they taught me not
To know that all my work was rot.)

M. E. Duff

THE CITY OF THE SCARLET SANDS

D. K. Latta

Verjik, last prince of dead Cathan'gian'tek stumbled as he crested the dune. Whistling wind raced about him, sending blistering sheets of desert sand against him as if the very ground itself were upon the march. His checkered cloak wrapped protectively about his lean form, a scarf covering his face as best it could, he squinted into the glowering distance. Before him spread an endless desert sea of blood red sand twirling about in the grip of the raging wind. At his back, the vista was repeated. Leaning heavily into the gale, he staggered down the treacherous declivity.

His information had been, at best, imperfect. To cross the desert, he had been told, would take no more than two weeks. It was now his third and the level of water in his canteen would not allow for backtracking. Therefore, with little expectation, he continued on his way.

Hours later he crumpled to his knees, exhausted from his unceasing struggle against the elements. He swayed, his ears awash with the drumming whistling, and felt ennui suffuse his weary limbs. Then he frowned. Between the gusting sheets of sand, he thought, for a moment, that he could distinguish shapes in the distance. He raised both hands against the wind and peered more intently. Shapes indeed, and moving. He struggled to his feet and waved his arms above his head, hollering, though his words were muffled beneath the desert's greater song. He staggered forward, then realized the shapes swelled in size. He was seen.

The figures remained shadows flickering upon a shifting curtain until, suddenly, they emerged from the storm almost at his very feet.

A dozen men garbed in crimson armour rode great long-necked, long-legged birds whose stocky wings were obviously incapable of acquiring for them the sky. The armoured men bore lances and swords and with their visors down they looked not quite the part of agents of salvation for which he had hoped. Instinctively, his hand found the pommel of his sword under his cloak.

A clanking and rattling chipped through the whistling wind as, lurching through the swirling dust, came a horse-drawn wagon, at the head of two others.

The foremost of the mounted knights gestured silently toward the lead wagon. Verjik hesitated. The knight gestured again, more curtly. Seeing little for it, and not welcoming another day alone upon the desert in any event, Verjik bowed ironically, and trotted to the wagon. He leapt up beside the driver. Without a word, the weird procession wheeled about upon its interrupted journey, the knights upon their fleet birds acting as both a vanguard, an escort and, mayhap, guards.

"Welcome, friend," shouted a voice above the wind.

Verjik turned to the driver. A middle-aged man grinned at him from between the folds of the scarf wrapped about his face.

"What brings you so far into the Deadman's Desert?"

"I miscalculated its breadth, I fear," Verjik yelled. "The Deadman's Desert? An ominous appellation."

The other laughed. "It is called that after the bloody hue of the sand. I am Carogahn, a merchant. I've trekked my goods across these sands many a time with no real mishap, the incessant wind and howling notwithstanding." Then his eyes darted to their silent escort. "This time we headed more westwardly than usual and seem, I must surmise, to have crossed into someone's territory, though it's marked on no map I've yet seen."

"Have they harmed you?"

"Nay. In fact, they may have done me a service, providing there's a settlement at the end of it." Carogahn gestured at the canopied wagon at his back. "Get inside, friend, out of this dust and wind; little sense in both of us suffering through it."

After more than two weeks of it, Verjik could not bring himself to decline. "I can relieve you in a little while."

Carogahn nodded. Verjik shouldered through the flap and found himself in a dim interior, decked out with pillows for sitting and sleeping, and a low table.

One half of the cabin was stacked with rolls of silk and cloth. Nor was he alone. A girl of but twelve or thirteen sat quietly, her head held regally as she stared before her.

"Excuse me," said Verjik. "I did not see you."

The girl smiled, as though to a private jest. "You are welcome to share what comfort there is, good sir."

He frowned and stared more intently. The girl refused to regard him, yet he did not perceive any arrogance or disdain. Then he realized: she was blind.

"What is it about my face that so transfixes you? A spot, perhaps?" she said amusedly

"Forgive me. I mistook you for one --"

"Blind? Indeed I am."

Verjik frowned even deeper. "Then how --?"

"My daughter is a sensitive," barked Carogahn from outside, chuckling good-naturedly. "Fear not, she keeps even her closest kin upon their toes."

"I am Alytha."

"I am Verjik."

She cocked her head, suddenly looking less mysterious; simply a girl perplexed. "You are sad."

"Nay. My mood is indifferent at the moment."

"Not momentarily sad. I mean that you are possessed of a lingering melancholy."

"Do not try to argue with her," called Carogahn. "I have long since ceased the attempt, and I am her father."

Verjik shifted uncomfortably. "I have experienced some grief, yes," he agreed at last. "I am of Cathan'gian'tek."

The girl inhaled sharply and Verjik sensed even her father had lost some of his joviality. "But is not that grand city...?"

"Dead? Aye. And her people, too. I am the last."

"And were you of great rank among your people?"

"I was their prince."

"And were you beloved?"

He scowled, not liking the girl's probing questions, but unable to take true offense so guilelessly did she ask them. "I was deposed."

"Then you are doubly alone," she finished quietly.

"A magnificent city, Cathan'gian'tek," called her father. "I visited it once, years ago, before its end. It was the finest I have ever seen..." His voice faded out as he sensed that his words were of scant consolation to his passenger.

* * *

Verjik did not know for how long he dozed. When he awoke it was to something he had not anticipated: silence. He looked to Alytha.

"The wind has ceased," she whispered, equally perplexed.

He did not ask how she knew he was awake, but went instead to sit with

her father outside. Carogahn glanced at him, his face drawn in bewilderment. At their back and their flanks, they still observed the swirling, raging maelstrom, but they appeared to be in some sort of natural calm.

Natural or praeternatural, Verjik, in truth, could not say.

Their silent escort continued to shepherd them forward, seeming unperturbed by the sudden alteration in their environment.

"There," Carogahn whispered.

Verjik looked and perceived before them, in the distance, a city, carved of the same ruddy hue as the desert. No collection of hovels or nomadic tents, it was comprised of grand towers and ornamental spires. It was a settlement that could exist here only in this strange atmospheric oasis, protected against the lashing winds. If it were truly carved of desert sandstone, Verjik realized, the winds would leave it a wrecked and sorry sight could they but caress its walls with their cruel and unforgiving talons.

"Sorcery," muttered the merchant under his breath.

"Perhaps it is but a natural result of the rushing currents that has left this area untouched." Yet, even as he said the words, Verjik did not believe them.

The caravan was ushered through the city, across scarlet cobblestones, beneath a crimson arch carved with delicate finery and beauteous representations. The buildings were magnificent, reminding Verjik of Cathan'gian'tek, and such echoes panged his much travelled heart.

Alytha squeezed up between the two men, and Verjik shifted over to provide her a seat upon the bench.

"Is it truly beautiful, Prince Verjik?" she asked.

"Aye," he said hoarsely. "As wondrous as you can possibly imagine."

She frowned unsurely. "And is there ugliness?"

He looked at her, confused by her question. "Not that I can see."

"And what of the ugliness you cannot see?"

It was his turn to scowl now, taking unnecessary offense at the girl's cryptic query.

Carogahn reined in his team of horses. A phalanx of red knights stood arrayed before them, blocking any further ingress into the city. Then a man shouldered between them, with a flowing pale blue cloak about his shoulders. He was handsome, though his face was lined by years. He stopped before Carogahn. "Greetings," he said. "I am Mairkyn Teh, lord of this humble desert city of Shimbaah'Quekebaah. Welcome." His gaze went from the merchant to Alytha, where it lingered momentarily, and then to Verjik. "Welcome to you all."

* * *

The ballroom was also hewn from sandstone, but stained with colours providing some relief from the land's sanguineous appearance. Pillars were intricately carved with delicate patterns and the walls likewise beauteously adorned. The sandstone floor was etched with a grid and alternate squares coloured white and black to give the illusion of tiles of ivory and obsidian.

The city's nobility had fallen out to meet them, men and women in bejewelled silks and satins.

Verjik noted the costumes of their hosts, the golden sheen of the goblets and plates upon a long jade table at one end of the room. Shimbaah'Quekebaah was undoubtedly a wealthy city, yet to what could it attribute its riches? Trade? Then why had even Carogahn, a travelling merchant, been unaware even that it existed? Piracy? Such a possibility made him uneasy, and still he could not credit that diverting a few humble merchants such as Carogahn could possibly provide the city with such an abundance of wealth and opulence.

Mairkyn Teh approached him. "Carogahn tells me you are of lost and mourned Cathan'gian'tek, the jewel of the civilized nations. You will find much here to appeal to you, I think."

"Indeed?" asked Verjik guardedly.

Mairkyn grinned. "Cathan'gian'tek provided much of the inspiration for the building of this place, you see," he said, guiding Verjik to the banquet table where Carogahn, Alytha and their companions were already helping themselves to the feast provided. "I and my followers were exiled from our own land for expounding radical views: an end to war, poverty and intolerance."

"Not so radical."

"Not to you or I, but very much so to the status quo. We wandered about for many years, seeking to find a land that embodied our ideals. I became disenchanted by our lack of success, disgruntled, depressed."

Verjik glanced about them questioningly.

"Aye. I realized that if I could not find my dream, I must realize it myself. I sought this inhospitable land, to provide succour from raiders or marauders, and I and my followers erected Shimbaah'Quekebaah."

"One would certainly disbelieve a city could stand for long amid these constant winds."

"Yes," agreed Mairkyn, not acknowledging Verjik's unspoken query. "But, as you can see, the winds do not touch us here. Come. I can tell food holds little interest for you for the moment, so allow me to reveal something that may well stir a more spiritual appetite." He led Verjik across the hall and flung wide ornate emerald doors. "As I said, I long admired Cathan'gian'tek, though it, too, fell short of my aspirations. When I heard it had fallen to sorcery, I grieved almost as though it had been my own homeland. Since that time, I have attempted to keep its memory alive."

Verjik inhaled sharply. The chamber in which they stood, architecturally, evoked his native land even more so than did the already reminiscent design of the desert city. Further, he actually recognized some of the accoutrements. A statue that had once stood in Cathan'gian'tek's main plaza towered in the center of the room, though he realized, on closer inspection, that it was a copy. There were tapestries, vases, paintings, some real, some meticulously duplicated from the originals, all from Cathan'gian'tek. Mairkyn hefted a parchment scroll from a small pedestal. "A symphony I acquired from a travelling scavenger. Cathan'gian'tek is not truly dead, Prince Verjik."

Verjik turned his head so that his host would not see the moisture in his eyes.

Mairkyn coughed. "I must attend my other guests. Stay as long as you like. Then, I beseech you, eat something." With a whisper of footfalls, Mairkyn departed.

Verjik slumped to the floor. After so long a homeless, friendless wanderer, he did indeed feel, in some small way, as though he had come home. And momentarily, his concerns, his unease generated by Alytha's comment, were swept away.

* * *

Verjik woke, his chamber in blackness, only the vaguest hint of dawn bleaching the starlight filtering through his glass window. He shook himself, unaware what had roused him. Then he heard it again.

It was a distant scream.

He flung aside his sheets and pulled on his breeches and shirt in an instant, then snatched up his sword. He raced into the hall to the room next door where Carogahn slept. The merchant slumbered obliviously amid satin sheets. "Carogahn, awaken!" Verjik said. I heard a scream." The man did not stir. "Carogahn?" He shook him by the shoulders, raising him from the pillow.

The merchant moaned groggily.

"Wake, man. Wake!" Unwillingly, his mind drew the most obvious conclusion: the merchant had been drugged. And Verjik remembered how concerned Mairkynn had been that he should consume something, advice Verjik, in the end, had left unheeded. "Carogahn!" He slapped the man across his face and his eyelids fluttered.

"Eh? What?" he demanded vaguely.

"Where is your daughter?"

"Muh...dau...daughter?"

Yanking him upright, satisfied that he was shaking off the befuddlement induced by the drug, Verjik said, "Awaken your companions. There is evil afoot." And so saying he fled the room.

He raced down the dark, crimson corridors, feeling in the eerie silence as if he was traversing through the innards of some great and malevolent beast. He vaulted a low rail and landed easily upon the level below. He froze, hearing now a voice raised in shouting. Momentarily he took it to be one half of an argument, then detected a singsong cadence to the muffled words. It was a chant. He frowned, then spun as a new sound impressed itself upon him, the clank of armour.

Two of the red-vizored knights pulled out of the shadows to block his path.

"Return to your room," said the one on the right. "All will be right in the morning."

Verjik stared, then realized that the sentries mistakenly assumed he had

ingested the drugged victuals, and that, befuddled, a simple, calming command would send him back to his bed. "Varlets," he hissed, swiping aside the right knight's blade with his sword and letting it tumble across the floor.

"Slay him," hissed the knight, stunned by the swiftness of his action.

The mute knight lumbered clumsily forward, still obviously not fully realizing he was not dealing with a drug-addled opponent. Verjik ducked beneath his stabbing swing and thrust his own blade between the armour protecting his shoulder and biceps. He wrenched it free, then gawked.

The knight did not bleed.

Suddenly, the knight who spoke came at him from behind, swinging his short sword. Verjik danced to the side and thrust out blindly, by luck slipping his weapon between the slats of the man's vizor. With a gurgled cry, a liquid the same hue as his armour came forth in a gout. Verjik kicked the corpse from his point and ducked and rolled beneath the heavy stroke of his remaining opponent. As he gained his feet, sword bared, he was confronted by yet another curious sight.

The mute knight hacked and hewed at the air where he had been but moments before, as though blind of his recent movements.

Turning, Verjik hurled his shoulder against the massive double doors and stumbled into the ballroom. The nobility of the city were gathered, illumined by flickering gold and orange auroras cast by the flaring torches. Alytha struggled by the emerald table, her wrists bound to one heavy leg, while next to her stood Mairkyn Teh, a long sword in his hands.

"Teh!" roared Verjik.

The city's master looked up.

"Verjik," cried Alytha, hearing his voice.

"What in the name of your gods do you think you are doing?" Verjik said, shouldering through the audience, vaguely surprised that none made any attempt to stop him.

"It is for the sake of my gods that I do this," he said. "As you surmised, it was not sweat alone that built Shimbaah'Quekebaah. The winds would tear it to pieces and disrupt the delicate sorcery I have employed to make it as prosperous as it is. The desert storm gods must be appeased so they will vent their fury elsewhere."

"Your gods will feed on your blood ere they taste this child," vowed the Prince of Cathan'gian'tek.

Mairkyn Teh scowled. "I half-hoped you, of all the travellers who have found their way here, and the few I have been forced to sacrifice, would understand. I do this for the future, that there be a beacon of civility and glory lighting the way forward for the barbarous lands, even as Cathan'gian'tek once did. Do not interfere." He gestured.

With a shuddering growl, two columns of crimson sand erupted out of the floor before Verjik and flowed into the aspects of demonic beasts. Both sported stubby legs and long powerful arms ending in talons; their heads had gaping mouths and crowns bristling with horns. Yet, for all their ferocity, they looked to be statues made of sandstone.

Verjik ducked beneath the swing of a massive paw and his sword flashed in the torchlight, cutting hand from wrist. Immediately, the severed limb exploded into harmless sand. The beast snorted querulously even as the living sand of its body flowed forward, to form a new hand.

"You do not make a shining beacon, but a black stain," yelled Verjik, leaping breathlessly away from another taloned swipe. "Your years of wandering hopelessness have driven you mad. A city founded on blood is not your dream, not if you speak of tolerance and peace." Verjik raked open the chest of a beast and it bled sand; otherwise it was unharmed.

"It is just a little blood," Mairkyn Teh said haltingly. "Is that so much to pay for?"

"For what?" demanded Verjik, grunting as he barely deflected a sandstone arm with his sword. "You have built a city, not of ideals, but devoid of them. It's a pretty bauble amid the dunes that has no meaning." Verjik had worked his way around the beasts, seeing they were unable to be slain, so that he might beard their master. He spun and his sword sparked against Mairkynn Teh's. "In the name of the man you must have once been."

Mairkyn Teh parried and thrust, but clumsily. "Listen!" he screamed, and Verjik, too, realized that he heard something he had not since the previous day, wind. "The storm gods think I break our pact. The winds come. I must sacrifice the child."

"Nay!" Verjik put himself before the blind girl, his blade deflecting the other's raining blows.

Suddenly the doors blasted inward and Carogahn and his companions arrived, but they were not alone.

The wind came as well. It roared through the hall, whipping and tearing, the unfettered fury of the storm that had so long been denied the halls of Shimbaah'Quekebaah. Both Verjik and Mairkyn Teh were bowled from their feet. The sand dunes were torn apart in an instant and the walls began crumbling under the assault. Verjik gawked. Some of the city's nobility broke and ran, screaming, but most did not. Those remaining twisted and turned in the wind, whittling away, scarlet sand coursing away from their dwindling forms.

Mairkyn Teh had spoken of sorcery making the city what it was, Verjik remembered. Obviously he had only a handful of followers; the rest of the city's inhabitants had been conjured from the desert as readily as the city itself.

"No!" Mairkyn Teh came at him, sword raised.

Verjik sidestepped and thrust. With a grunt, Mairkyn Teh fell to the sand, his blood merging unnoticed with its ruddy hue.

"Verjik," called Carogahn, having freed his daughter. "We must hurry to what's left of the stables and get the wagons."

Verjik hesitated. The roof had been torn from the hall, the walls now scoured and crumbling. The verdant doors leading to the next room had fallen from their hinges, but beyond was just a mounting dune, those that had not been of the sand to begin with. A light hand was laid upon his shoulder.

"Do you weep for your lost city?" Alytha said softly.

He touched her hand, sand sticking to the moisture on his cheeks. "I weep for the master of this place. He created but an echo of glory, and was, in truth, but an echo of the man he had been." He cast one final, sorrowful glance at the room that had held the treasures of his people, then said, "Let us hurry to the wagons."

TROUBLE DAY

Matthew Wayne Selznick

The quality of the breakfast Scor Morlyn was picking at that first morning in a Kwaanantag City tavern was indicative of his financial situation. The meat was greasy with gristle and fat, the mug of essa, watery and bitter. Still, he hoped that by day's end he would find a wealthy merchant in need of a talented Sword like himself.

Scor was attempting to distract himself from the vile food with thoughts of job security when the tavern door swung open. A large man stood framed by the morning light. He stepped into the dim room, glancing around until at last his eyes found Scor.

Unconsciously, Scor's hand left his serving knife and went to the pommel of the sword resting at his belt.

The man raised a finger. From across the room, Scor could see that the hand trembled.

"You!"

Scor nudged his chair back from the table just a bit. The man crossed the room to stand before him. The muscles of his neck were tense and corded. His fists clenched and unclenched. Scor noticed a red vein pulsing on the man's sweaty forehead.

"I don't think we've met," Scor said mildly.

The man groaned with frustration. "Kenda said you'd be here." He leaned in close to Scor's face. "Now where is it?" The man's breath, while sour, held no trace of drink or smoke. His behavior was all rage.

Scor did not move. He gave the man what he hoped was a disarming smile. "I think you have someone else in mind..."

With a howl, the man overturned the table. Scor's breakfast hit the sawdust floor with a wet smack, the essa flying from the mug and filling the air with a smell not unlike urine. Scor was out of the chair and three steps back, sword drawn, before the mess had a chance to further stain his road-worn tunic.

The few customers in the tavern laid aside their conversations and arguments to watch the confrontation. A few of the more entrepreneurial types muttered wagers back and forth. The tavern keeper shook his head and disappeared through a curtain in the back.

The sword in Scor's hands pointed directly at the stranger's neck. The man never looked at it, instead staring directly into Scor's eyes.

Scor said, very quietly, "You are making a mistake."

"I know you know where it is," the man hissed. "Kenda said look for the big blond. He knew where you'd be. You can't hide from me."

Scor realized that desperation was clouding the man's judgement. He took a step back, never changing the vector of his blade. "I don't want to hurt you. I don't know what you're talking about."

They stood like that for a while, Scor like a statue, the stranger heaving and twitching. At last the man's eyes narrowed and he seemed to relax. He made a noise that could have been sheepish laughter.

"You know I'll get it," he said.

Other than raise an eyebrow, Scor did not move.

"But you don't have it."

"No."

The man turned abruptly and started to walk away. Halfway across the room he whirled around, a thin killer's blade flying from his hand. Scor dropped and rolled. The blade found a home in the back wall of the tavern.

In the split second that it took Scor to regain his feet, two things happened. His attacker rushed at him with another knife, and the tavern keeper yelled, "Kill!" and released a snarling woodslink.

The raging stranger saw the woodslink bounding toward him, teeth gleaming, the bony, armoured tail slashing the air, and his eyes went wide. He was too late to stop his charge. Scor, intent on dealing with one threat at a time, angled his sword in an upward arc and caught the man in the gut. The man made a wet, surprised sound and went down.

The woodslink altered course to catch the prey that was still standing. Scor yanked his sword free of the corpse, but not in time. The 'slink knocked him off his feet and began to try to eat his face.

Scor pushed aside the beast's jaws and rolled away, keeping his sword flat against his chest. The woodslink lashed out with its tail, and to Scor it felt like a metal whip had lashed his calf. The animal snapped its tail again, but by now Scor was a few paces away and on his feet, favouring his injured leg.

Scor, unfortunately, had some experience with these predators. He knew that it would try to pounce again, intent on his neck and face. He waited. The two combatants circled one another. Scor panted and watched the woodslink's yellow, slitted eyes. The woodslink growled and hissed, its leathery neck pouch puffing and pulsing while the wicked tail thrashed.

Scor heard the tavern keeper laugh. "I hate it when people fight in my place. Bando makes sure they don't do it again, don't you, baby?"

There was some laughter from the clientele, and more betting.

Bando the woodslink pounced, a sleek killing machine the size of a man gliding across the distance that separated it from its prey. At the last possible moment, with the thing's talons a finger's breadth from his face, Scor dropped on his back, his sword pointing to the ceiling. The tip of the blade, held firm in Scor's iron grip and still gleaming with the stranger's blood, opened the woodslink's belly from sternum to tail. Yowling with its last breath, it slid across the floor and

thudded against the wall, but not before showering Scor with bits of itself.

Scor got up, disgusted but still wary. The clientele was exchanging coins while they celebrated or cursed. The tavern keeper simply stood there with his mouth wide in disbelief, his eyes beginning to water.

At that moment someone else came through the door, a tall man with a lean, muscled build and a shock of wavy blond locks on his head. He surveyed the scene with trepidation.

Scor spotted him. "Are you," he gasped, "a friend of Kenda's?"

The newcomer locked eyes with the bloody warrior and saw himself, or at least a close relative. He bolted.

Calf throbbing, stinking of woodslink entrails, Scor sheathed his sword and went after him. He burst into the bright morning light and immediately had to dodge a woman burdened by a wide yoke, on her way to the nearest well. Scor ducked and caught sight of his quarry rounding a corner.

Scor took the same turn, threading through the people that crowded the narrow, dusty streets. The man was fast, and Scor's calf was slowing him down. He hollered, "I don't want to hurt you!" He did not expect that to slow the man down, and it didn't.

The chase continued through the congested streets of the worst part of Kwaanantag City until at last Scor found that he had cornered the man in a trash-strewn alley. Scor drew his sword and smiled.

The man gulped. "I thought you didn't want to hurt me."

Scor shrugged. "I didn't think you were listening." He lowered his sword, noting that the other man was unarmed. "So what's this all about?"

"It's nothing you need concern yourself with," Scor's almost-twin said politely.

Scor sighed. "What is your name?"

"Fard."

Scor nodded. "Fard," he said, "I arrived in Kaebrith this morning, just a little while before sunwake. I've been travelling for days, all the way from Aenik. I'm tired and road-weary, so I thought that I would stop and have some breakfast before beginning my business here." A fat, slow buzzer became attracted to the gore on his tunic. He slapped at it and took a step closer to Fard, who backed up against the greasy clay wall behind him.

"I'm barely seated when that poor fool back there comes up to me, thinking I'm you and demands something which I assume you have, something that, regrettably, he thought was important enough to die for. Before I know it, I have a woodslink on me and I need to kill that, too.

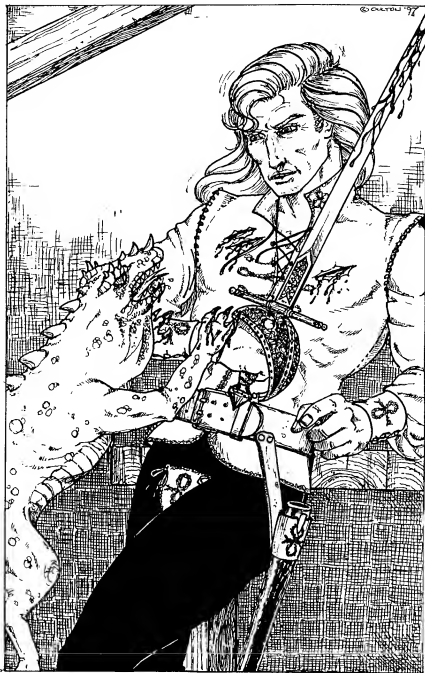
"I hate woodslinks, Fard. But now I've got its guts all over me and I've killed a stranger, and that..." He stepped closer and raised the tip of his sword to Fard's trembling Adam's apple. "That is why I need to concern myself."

Fard swallowed. "I stole something for them."

Scor nodded. "Kenda and my breakfast companion."

"Digho. Right."

"What is it?"



"A key."

Scor was getting bored. With great control, he applied the tip of his sword so that the slightest drop of blood welled from Fard's neck. "Listen, why don't you just tell me everything, so that I don't lose my patience and really slip with my blade, all right?"

Fard nodded. "Kenda and Digho once worked for a powerful trader, Daen Caul. They learned of an artifact that Daen Caul keeps locked in a crypt, a thing from the time of the Demon Emperor that would be worth a lot to the Shaper's priests, those meddling Caretakers...something magickal. Kenda hired me to steal the key, and I did..."

"You decided you might make out a little better on your own," Scor ventured.

"That's right. Kenda went on and on about what they would make off this thing, but did he offer me anything close to what the job seemed to deserve? I figured I'd lift the key and steal the thing myself!"

"Kenda second guessed you."

Fard looked embarrassed. "My own fault. I'm a creature of habit. It's common knowledge that I like to pass my time at the tavern. When I didn't show up at Kenda's last night, he must have sent Digho to get me. Digho's a killer."

"Digho was too upset to be much of a killer," Scor pointed out. "He must have really needed the money this mysterious item would have brought in."

"They seem to be in some kind of situation. Probably owe somebody."

"Hm." Scor thought about it. "How did you manage to break into this powerful trader's without getting caught? You must be quite a thief."

"Well, I am," Fard agreed. "Kenda provided me with plans for Daen Caul's manor, and apart from some staff, it seemed like the place was unguarded. I could have done a lot worse than just stealing a little key, let me tell you!"

"I'm sure." Scor began to see how he could turn the situation to his own advantage. "Give it to me."

Fard found it in himself to be appalled despite the blade at his throat. "What?"

"Surely you foresaw that development, didn't you?" Scor smiled. "It's what a good thief would do, isn't it?"

"But," Fard stammered, "but you're some kind of wandering mercenary? You aren't a thief!"

"What I am is low on resources and between clients," Scor said reasonably. "Why shouldn't I make the most of what the Shaper has given me this morning?"

Fard's shoulders slumped. "Shaper be hanged," he said bitterly.

Scor shrugged. "Actually, that's how I feel, too. Still, this is too good to pass up. Give me the key."

Fard looked away. "I don't have it."

"All right. Take me to it."

"I have no choice?"

Scor smiled. "You owe it to me." He backed away from the thief and

extended an arm toward the street. "After you."

Fard started to head for the mouth of the alley, casting wary eyes at Scor. Scor kept pace behind him, his sword held at a relaxed angle.

"By the way, Fard," Scor said. "Don't think of trying to run. I'm a fully trained Sword of the Gehjaad school. You'd be dead before your third step hits the ground. All right?"

Fard threw his hands in the air. "Fine."

Fard led Scor to a small room above a tailor's shop. Inside was a strained straw mattress, a chamber pot that needed cleaning, and a few scattered pieces of clothing. The glass of the single tiny sealed window was grimy and opaque.

"Nice place you have here, Fard," Scor said.

"Well, I had planned to acquire the means to move out," the thief replied, "until recently."

Scor shrugged, "Where's the key?"

Fard knelt down by the mattress and began to dig around underneath it. Scor watched him, his sword ready. "Make sure the key is all that's in your hands when you're done there," he cautioned.

Fard stood up with the key between two fingers. "You're real careful, aren't you."

"It's why I'm where I am," Scor said, "and you're where you are." He took the key and tucked it beneath his belt. "Now how about showing me the crypt?"

"What? Why should I?"

Scor sighed and rolled his eyes. "You owe me, Fard, like I said. I'll bet the city guard is looking for the person responsible for the mess back at that tavern right now. I'll never find work in this city, and in all the Western Continent this is the city where someone in my line of work finds the best jobs. You've spoiled that for me, you and the unfortunate fact that we share a certain resemblance." Scor swung his blade in a complicated arc. "That, and the fact that if you were to join Digbo in death, the only person that would complain about your passing would be yourself. So indulge me in this one thing, if you would be so kind."

"What about when I show you the crypt and you've got this thing, whatever it is. You just gonna kill me then?"

"Fard, you have my word that, if everything is as you say it is, you will end this day right back here in your room, safe and unharmed."

"Your word?" Fard spat. "You're not much more than a thief yourself, Sword! Why should I trust you?"

Scor darkened. "Because you have no other option. Let's go."

"Now? In the middle of the day?"

"If the grave garden in Kwaanantag City is anything like the others I have visited, then it's at night that the guards are posted and the traps are set against the likes of you, right? So we'll walk in at sunhigh and honour the ancestors like ordinary folks." Scor held open the door.

The grave garden lay in a field to the northeast of the city, framed by an

extension of the city walls. They entered by the main gate, and since Scor had sheathed his sword, there was no challenge from the gate warden. Fard led Scor to the small city of ornately carved altars, memorials, and crypts for the city's wealthier dead. At last they stood before a stone building topped with the statue of a stout, bald man with an open spice chest at his feet.

"This is it," Fard said. "The crypt of Kulad Caul. The merchant's father."

Scor drew the key from his belt and took a long look at the crypt. "All right, Fard. You can..." Something caught his eye. "Wait a moment. What's this?"

"What?"

"Well, there's some fresh footprints in the dirt here," Scor replied.

"So what?"

"I need to be sure," Scor said, and bent down to get a closer look. He heard the whistle of a crossbow bolt where his head had been.

Fard collapsed. The bolt protruded from his left eye. The right one stared blankly at Scor, although the luckless thief's body still twitched.

Scor looked in the direction the shot should have come from, and saw the very surprised shooter turn and run off into the maze of sarcophagi.

"Damn it, Fard," Scor cursed, and made to pursue the assassin, whom he guessed to be Kenda. The arrival of four men on the backs of armoured 'hoppers stopped him short.

Three of them were city guardsmen with larger crossbows of their own, trained at Scor's heart. The fourth, in a Caretaker's gray, dismounted and surveyed the situation.

"One of you track down the runner," he said to the man behind him. A guardsman tapped the reins of his mount and the beast made off with powerful, leaping strides.

"Unbuckle your sword, please."

Scor did so, eyes on the Caretaker. The two remaining guardsmen dismounted and moved to flank Scor. They shouldered their crossbows, and pulled out shortswords that they pressed lightly into Scor's ribs.

"Don't make any trouble," one of them advised.

Scor said, "Today my trouble's come fully formed, it seems."

The Caretaker stepped closer to Scor. "You have the key?"

"I don't know which key you mean," Scor replied.

The Caretaker's eyes narrowed, his bushy brows knitting together beneath his balding pate. "The key to this crypt. The one stolen by that thief in the dirt behind you. Hand it over or join him."

Scor affected a look of puzzlement. "Is vigilante justice the new way to spread your doctrine of 'balance and harmony', Caretaker?"

The Caretaker reddened. "One last time. The key."

The guardsmen pressed their blades a little more insistently into Scor's sides. Scor sighed. "Very well." He held out his left hand and opened it. The key sat in his palm.

"A very intelligent decision," said the Caretaker. He gingerly removed

the key from Scor's hand, as if he were afraid to touch his skin. "You will now come with us and face trial for the death of this thief and one other." He said to the guards, "Bind him."

While Scor's wrists were bound behind his back with thick leather straps, the third guardsman came bounding back on his 'hopper. The fresh corpse of Kenda lay behind the saddle, strapped across the 'hopper's broad flanks. The guard reined in and shrugged. "There was a struggle."

A hooded man came from around a bend in the path and approached the scene. Despite the newcomer's plain clothing, he immediately dominated the tableau.

"How pleased my father would be," the man said, "by all the attention to his monument."

The Caretaker seemed taken aback, but quickly recovered. "Move on, citizen. We are taking a murderer away from the site of his misdeeds."

The hooded man looked at Scor for a moment, chuckled, and regarded the Caretaker. "Two dead men in the grave garden, and fortunate enough to have a Caretaker close at hand to ease their ascension to the arms of the Shaper. Ironical."

The Caretaker was getting nervous. "Citizen, I must insist you continue on and attend to your business. Allow us to finish restoring this hallowed place to balance and harmony."

Scor had to snicker.

The stranger removed his hood to reveal a broad, angular face crowned by short, spiny black hair. The eyes that flashed beneath the hairless brows were darker still.

"I am attending to my business, Shaper's Hand. I am Daen Caul."

The Caretaker blanched. "Daen Caul..."

Scor opened his mouth. "Well, that's perfect! Daen Caul, the Caretaker has something to give to you."

The look the Caretaker delivered to Scor told the Sword that he had made a lifelong enemy. Scor welcomed the association.

Daen Caul said, "Have you something of mine?"

Before the Caretaker could reply, Scor volunteered, "The key to your father's crypt, honoured sir. It seems that these two dead men made off with it."

The expression on the Caretaker's face reflected anything but balance and harmony. He unfolded his fist and presented the key to Daen Caul.

The merchant took the key. In a tone of gracious civility that somehow veiled the promise of dreadful unpleasantness, Daen Caul said to the Caretaker, "I am grateful for your efforts. I think, however, that my satisfaction would be made complete by your absence. Now."

"As you wish," the Caretaker said in a low voice.

Daen Caul added, "Take the bodies with you, but leave the living one with me. And please give First Speaker Liernal my fondest regards."

The Caretaker and his lackeys rode off. Daen Caul removed Scor's bonds.

"I am grateful for your timely arrival," Scor said.

Daen Caul shook his head. "Enough. I am aware of your involvement in this."

Scor didn't understand how that could be, but knew not to attempt to deceive this man. "I see." He thought about it. "You may not be aware that my intention was to return the key to you."

Daen Caul said nothing, instead watching Scor with that intimidating gaze.

"I have no interest in whatever it is you have locked away in there," Scor continued, forcing himself to meet the other man's eyes. "I am a Sword of the Gehjaad school, seeking only to find a respectable client in this city."

Daen Caul kept his silence, but his long look at Scor's stinking, soiled clothing was eloquent.

Scor shrugged. "It's been a long day," he plunged ahead. "With respect, I find it hard to believe that a merchant of your obvious power could fall victim to thieves such as the unfortunate trio I encountered today. It seems to me that someone such as yourself could use a person such as I, so that you could concern yourself with less... visceral matters."

Did Scor see the slightest hint of a smile curl the thin lips of Daen Caul? "A bold offer," the merchant conceded. "Do you feel that you have the ability to meet the challenges a client of my obvious power may present to you?"

Scor let a smile of his own break free. A sense of relief flooded him. He was as good as employed. "Daen Caul," he said, retrieving his sword from the bloody dirt, "what could be worse than today?"

"You may find out."

Daen Caul swept the hood back upon his head and walked out of the grave garden. Scor followed his new employer back to the city.

THE DIVINE WIND

Carl Mills

"Yee Zhao-lim, you and your son, Wai-lim, are to come with me to have audience with the emperor."

Wai-lim couldn't believe what the messenger said. No one in their village had ever been to the Forbidden City. Zhao-lim frowned. At that time the emperor was the Mongol warlord Kublai Khan. Still, if they had been commanded to go, they had no choice.

"Bring enough money to send me letters letting me know you're safe," Wai-lim's mother told them, as she helped them pack for the journey.

It was the Moon of Deepest Snow when they set out. The messenger set a hard pace with his horse, and they had to keep up on ponies.

"What would the emperor want with us in such a dark season, and in such haste?" Wai-lim asked his father. "We're just peasant-farmers."

"Perhaps word of our travels has reached him."

Several moons before, Wai-lim and his father had flown the Black Welkin using giant kites. There they had discovered dangers the people of earth-lands weren't meant to explore so they destroyed the kites upon their return.

"Maybe the emperor wants us to build him kites," said Wai-lim.

Zhao-lim only frowned.

After a week of hard traveling, they came at last to the Forbidden City. Wai-lim looked in awe at the marvels of Peking, and was reminded of some of the wonders he'd seen in the Land of Dreams, but here the hedge-maze gardens, soaring castle walls and multi-storeyed pagodas were real. The Mongol guards looked grimly at them as they passed the towering gates into the palace grounds. There were several buildings splendid enough to be the emperor's palace, but the messenger led them instead to a single, large tent sitting in the middle of a lawn.

Inside was Kublai Khan, surrounded by soldiers instead of courtesans, and weapons instead of tapestries. His squat, stocky body and sharp-featured face radiated cruelty.

"Zhao-lim, you and your son will build me kites for my armies to travel to the Black Welkin, just as yours took you," he said.

"You majesty, it was only by accident we flew to the Black Welkin," said Zhao-lim. "The Dragon of the West had grown angry when we were flying our kites, and blew us there by chance. Even if we built the same kites, and the Dragon of the West blew angry again, his winds might take your men anywhere besides the Black Welkin."

"Then you will build me kites capable of controlling the wind. You will not leave here until you do. For I have heard from far and wide that you and your son are the best kite-builders in the empire."

"Your majesty, your will is our command, but we cannot do the impossible. No one man is capable of controlling the ether winds of the Black Welkin, just as no one man is capable of controlling the winds that blow ships across the sea."

"Then you will build me a ship controlled by several men to cross the Black Welkin. I will be neither belayed nor delayed. My grandfather, Ghenghis Khan, united the Mongol hordes into an army that conquered the West as far as the Russian Principalities. My father and his brothers conquered the lands of the followers of the Prophet past their imperial city of Baghdad. I myself have just finished conquering the northern half of the Middle Kingdom, and all of the Hermit Kingdom as well. It is only a matter of time before our hordes rule all the lands on earth. But I want more than the earth; every piece of earth has been conquered by someone already, at some time or another. I want to be the first man to conquer the moon!

"For that, I will need an armada such as has never been built. You will design the ships of that armada for me, Zhao-lim, you and your son. If you refuse or if you fail, I will kill you both, and your village. You have until the end of the Moon of Cherry Blossoms to perform this task. Now go."

Wai-lim and his father were led to a workshop to design the ships.

"Da, what shall we do? If there are people on the moon, we can't help the emperor kill them."

"Yet for now we must do as he says for our village's sake. Just pray to the gods the moon is a desert, so his armies can conquer nothing but sand."

For four moons, they worked on a prototype ship. It was so unlike any built before, the emperor snarled in rage when he visited to check their progress.

"What is this ridiculous vessel you would have my armies sail in to cross the Black Welkin?"

It looked like an abnormally long and narrow junk with a hull made of multiple layers of paper waxed on the outside for water-proofing, supported by a bamboo frame. It had three rowing tiers, with silken oars shaped like falcon wings.

"Your majesty, it is the only design that will do," said Zhao-lim. Let me explain. The ships will use normal sails to go to the edge of the ocean. Just before the edge, the sails, their masts, and the men who control them must be cast off. You should have normal ships to pick up the castaways. Once at the edge the flying ships will fall into the Black Welkin. The wing-oars cannot move fast enough to lift the ships, however; they will fall through the ether flow. But it must be a controlled fall, guided by the wing-oars, and the fall must come when the moon is rising toward them. From the ether, the men must throw a grappling anchor to hook onto the moon's surface, then slide down the chain. Catapults will throw each man back into the ether when the invasion is over, so the ships, waiting with nets, can catch them. To return home, the ships wait till the moon has risen above the earth. From there they will fall free from the ether and back into the seas of earth."

The emperor furrowed his brow at the explanation, but grunted approval.

At the end of the Moon of Cherry Blossoms, their design was complete. It was tested on water, and found to float. So the emperor had his workers duplicate the prototype nine hundred times, enough ships to carry forty thousand soldiers. At the beginning of the Moon of Deepest Heat, the Armada was built. The armies gathered, and on the sixteenth day of that Moon, the ships embarked, with Wai-lim, his father, and the emperor on the mother ship.

They sailed to the edge of the world slowly, for by themselves the flying vessels weren't designed to travel on water quickly.

"Your majesty, where are the normal ships, the ones that were supposed to help tow us out and pick up the castaways?" asked Zhao-lim.

"There was no time to build them," said the emperor.

'He means there was no money to build them,' thought Zhao-lim, imagining the tragedy about to unfold.

When the ships came at night to the waterfall at the edge of the world, the masts and sails were cast into the water, and so were the slaves who'd manned them. Eighteen thousand men drowned to their deaths, as the flying ships fell off the earth.

Pumping the wing-oars furiously, the soldiers directed the ships' fall



through the ether flow, toward the moon. It was the twenty-first day of the Moon of Deepest Heat when they reached it, and sent their grappling anchors down. Only a few stayed behind on the ships to cast the nets for the return; the rest slid down the chains with collapsible catapults to land on the moon's surface.

Wai-lim and his father accompanied the emperor and his armies there. They were on the beach of a sea that stretched onto the horizon. The water was so calm it was transparent; there was no wind, and all about was silence. Eldritch trees with trunks of onyx and palm-like leaves of emerald pocked the shoreline. Crystal pelicans with sapphire eyes flew overhead, their cries like the tinkling of glass. Now and then transparent fish could be seen in the transparent sea, nibbling on amethyst seaweed.

"March toward the mountains," the emperor commanded his men. "We shall see if there's any civilization nearby."

The mountains were five leagues from the beach, and as they marched over their foothills, Wai-lim and his father prayed the land was deserted, but in vain. For from the summit of the first hill, the Mongol Hordes saw the shining turrets of a city just a league away. The city seemed to be built all from one stone, which faintly glowed all the colors of the rainbow, purple at the base and green at the turrets. Every home was its own small castle. The people, when they came close enough to see them, were short, had pointed ears, large owl eyes, and wore radiant silks.

The Mongols attacked by surprise, killing everyone in the city easily; the people seemed to have neither armies nor weapons.

Wai-lim and his father were so distraught they fled back to the beach.

"If these people had any gods to pray to, I would beseech them myself for a miracle," Zhao-lim told his son. "Nothing else can save them from the Mongols."

"Then we shall have a miracle."

They turned and saw a host of moon-people stepping off a ship not unlike their own, but smaller, and made of silk instead of paper.

"You are not like the others," said their captain.

"No, they are Mongols; we are Chinese," said Zhao-lim. "And we would help you if we could."

"The people of the Middle Kingdom are known to my race," said the captain. "For we once dwelt on earth, where we were called elves. And we remember your people as a peaceful kind, more interested in art than warfare."

"Unfortunately, our peaceful ways backfired on us."

Zhao-lim explained to the elves how the Mongol hordes had killed millions of his people to conquer the Middle Kingdom, and told of the emperor's ambition to be the first man to conquer the moon.

Then the elves related how they'd left the earth centuries ago in flying ships of bamboo and silk. They'd landed on the moon, on the beach of a sea they called Tranquility because it was so calm. Finding no food they could eat there, the elves became a race of fishermen, fishing the ether flow in the Black Welkin from their silken ships. They built a city called Kyushu, close to the bay, which

they called Hakata.

"We had to return early today because a kamikaze is coming."

"What is a kamikaze?"

"Among our people it is known as the Divine Wind, which brings the ether tsunamis. The tsunami coming now will destroy your emperor's ships soon, if his soldiers don't return and cast off. We wish you would tell him this, for we have no desire to have such a savage race shipwrecked here, with nothing to do but conquer the rest of our cities."

"That we will do gladly, but the emperor is a stubborn man; he will want to return."

"Wait, captain, can your people predict when the ether tsunamis come?" asked Wai-lim.

"They usually come during what your people call the Moon Between Leaves and Snow."

"The emperor needed us to design his ships. Perhaps we can persuade him he needs a different kind of ship for his armada to survive the tsunamis. That will delay him perhaps until the Moon Between Leaves and Snow. When he returns then, you can have some defenses ready, and perhaps the tsunamis will destroy the armada while you occupy them in the ether flow."

"You are willing to do this for us? But if the emperor makes you come again you will die in the divine wind also."

"No we'll build ourselves kites as we did before, and we'll glide back to earth."

The elves were delighted, and agreed to the plan.

Wai-lim and his father returned to the emperor to tell him of the coming tsunami. So the Mongol army retreated to their ships. The tsunami hit them just when they were leaving, destroying two hundred ships and killing thirteen thousand five hundred soldiers before they returned to earth.

The emperor was furious.

"Those ships you designed me are worthless! How am I to conquer the moon if my fleet cannot even withstand the ether flow?! You knew about those ether storms!"

"Your majesty, we can only build with what we are given," said Zhao-lim. "Birds use bones and feathers to achieve effortlessly what we can only struggle for, such is the limit of man's resources."

"We shall see about the limits of my resources," said the emperor.

He issued a decree, and the bones of millions of Chinese who'd died during the Mongol conquest were exhumed and brought to the palace. With another decree, millions of birds were killed and plucked so their feathers could be used in place of paper. There were no more storks or cranes left in the middle Kingdom when this had been done.

"Now design a lighter, stronger ship," the emperor told them. "And do not fail me again. I am sending you with the armada. If the ships are destroyed, you shall die, too."

So, Wai-lim and his father began their labor. By the Moon of Falling

Leaves, they had designed a prototype ship made out of bones and feathers.

"Da, what if the bones and feathers really are strong enough to withstand the tsunamis?" asked Wai-lim.

"We can only pray they aren't, and that the elves have built strong enough defenses. Now come, we must build ourselves kites to escape back to earth when the tsunamis hit."

By the Moon Between Leaves and Snow, the emperor's workers had built four thousand four hundred copies of the ship, enough to carry a hundred and forty-two thousand soldiers! Then the invasion began again, with Wai-lim and his father sent along with the first wave of ships. They were dismayed to find the ether flow calm, when they fell off the earth's edge into it.

However, when the Mongols descended to the moon, they found a wall more than twice as tall as a man and about half a dozen leagues long had been built around the beach at Hakata bay. The elves stood on top of the wall and shot at them with arrows. The two armies were thus closely matched, and skirmishes raged around the bay. Neither side could gain a clear advantage, and at length the Mongols re-embarked. Sailing earthward, they joined the main body of their army, which had finally arrived after a delay in the Middle Kingdom. The slaves who were supposed to man the sails learned their predecessors had been tossed into the ocean. The ensuing revolt had been crushed, but it took two weeks to build enough ships to bring the castaways back so they wouldn't revolt at sea. Now, however, all the Mongol ships and most of the troops were assembled. Toward the end of the Moon Between Leaves and Snow, the combined forces attacked another elven city, Takashima, destroying it. From there the Mongols prepared to invade Kyushu, from the mountains rather than at Hakata Bay.

Meanwhile, the elves were busy performing ceremonies at shrines all over the moon to beseech their gods for aid.

As if in answer to their prayers, the Divine Wind struck the ether flow around Takashima, with devastating effect. Four thousand ships were smashed, and a hundred thousand Mongols were killed. The remaining ships fell back to earth in disarray.

The emperor was so enraged, his first order was to slay Wai-lim and his father. But the survivors told him the ship that had borne them was destroyed. This did little to console the emperor. His rage became grief, as he realized that without the two Chinese to design ships, he would never be able to conquer the moon. Kublai Khan was so stricken, he spent his remaining days in a drunken stupor, weeping and talking to himself, addressing his grandfather, Ghenghis Khan, asking what had gone wrong.

Meanwhile Wai-lim and his father had escaped the tsunami on their kites and returned to earth, but not before meeting some elven sailors in the ether flow along their way.

"Our people are eternally grateful, Wai-lim. Please accept these as a token of our appreciation."

Back in their village, their neighbours were amazed at the size of the diamonds Wai-lim and his father brought back with them.

"How did they become so smooth?" asked their mother. "Most diamonds are cut into angular shapes."

"No one cut them that way. It's their natural shape," Wai-lim explained. "They're pelican eggs."

CASTLE KITE

Beecher Smith

The raindrops pounded relentlessly away at Sir Balin's helmet and had already drenched every fibre of clothing beneath his armour. His faithful steed, True, was beginning to falter from fatigue and the exhausted knight knew as the cloud-covered sun began to set, they must find shelter soon. But where? They were lost in the most desolate part of the Cornish woods, far from any known village or town.

Past a bend in the narrow trail he came to a crossroads. A sign pointed down the larger, intersecting road, indicating the way on the left led to Castle Kite. Despite the sinister name, Balin hoped hospitality would await him there.

Some two leagues onward, he smelled the familiar salt air of the sea. The forest thinned away and, as he rounded the next bend, the castle came into view. It was little more than a keep, four walls meeting at turrets on each corner, with the manor-house built onto the west wall facing the sea. The gray, lichen-covered battlements looked ominous in the fading twilight.

The drawbridge had been lowered and the portcullis raised, as though Sir Balin was expected. As he rode across the moat, the rain stopped. Inside, the courtyard appeared deserted. Where were the usual guards, artisans, and servants who inhabited every castle?

At an upper window, a face appeared. It was the loveliest woman he had ever beheld. Her flawless oval face was a perfect cameo framed by chestnut braids. Large doe-like eyes peered down at him. An instant later she was gone.

A stooped figure emerged from a doorway. His face was covered by a cowl. He lowered the hood with both hands, revealing the craggy, hawk-like face of an elderly, bearded man with a distinctly hooked nose. He gave a forced smile through white whiskers and said, "Greetings, stranger. Welcome to Castle Kite." His smooth, sibilant voice made the young knight uneasy.

Dismounting, Balin announced, "I am Sir Balin Le Sauvage, Knight of King Arthur's Round Table. In the name of your sovereign overlord and king, I ask shelter for the evening. Who is master here?"

"Why, I am. My hospitality is always extended to visitors, especially those from Camelot." The old man chuckled. If his smile had made Balin uneasy, his laugh was positively unnerving.

However, the mention of other visitors from Camelot drove Balin to ask, "Have there been others recently? I seek my twin brother, Sir Balan. Have you seen him?"

"No," the elder replied. "We have not seen your brother." From his tone, he sounded truthful.

Creaking noises behind him distracted Balin's attention. He saw the portcullis being lowered and the drawbridge being raised.

"Soon it will be dark," the old man announced. "You were wise to seek shelter here. The woods are unsafe at night."

"I still do not know your name," Balin said.

Extending his right hand, the old man said, "I am the Wizard Harlock, Lord of Castle Kite."

Balin now understood his prior apprehension. As a knight he lived by the code of chivalry, but wizards knew no such code. From his dealings with Merlin, he knew their only protocol was sorcery. If their magic worked, and as long as it served their purposes, it was good. The only evil they knew was failure.

Unlike an upright knight, who was required to spare the life of a vanquished opponent who yielded, a wizard was not so bound. He could do what he pleased with a defeated enemy. This was why ordinary people feared all wizards.

"I have never heard Merlin speak of you. Do you know him?"

Harlock chuckled again. "We are acquainted. Come inside. I'll see that your horse is attended to. Roderick, come wait upon our guest."

A lackey approached and reached for the reins to True's bridle. The black stallion's eyes grew wide. He whinnied a tintamarre of apprehension and backed away.

Balin said, "Perhaps, I should attend to my own mount, since I am without squire and he is not used to your lackey. Lead me to the stable and send for me in a quarter of an hour to show me my own sleeping quarters."

With True curried and stabled, Balin allowed the lackey to show him where he would be staying. Past the great hall and up a winding staircase to the second floor, the servant opened a large oak door and ushered the young knight into a large chamber with a canopied bed and walls bedecked with tapestries of hunting scenes.

Like his master, something about Roderick disturbed Balin. The man was no older than perhaps nineteen, but had the pinched face and lacklustre eyes of one already tired of life. He would not look directly at Balin. After he deposited Balin's baggage on the floor, he announced, "Supper will be served soon. A bath and fresh garments await you in the next room."

To Balin's surprise, he found the adjoining room contained a sunken tub with warm water, soap, and towels. A rich dress robe of soft wool had been left on a table at the other side of the bath.

He had barely finished bathing and dressing when the door to his bedroom opened and the damsel from the window entered. She raised a finger to her lips, indicating he shouldn't speak. She whispered, "I am Gwyneth, Harlock's daughter. He holds me here against my will. Please help me escape. If you do, I shall be forever in your debt."

With the awkward grace of a fawn, she licked her lips, then moved close

to him. He smelled her sweet breath and the fresh odour of her young, unspoiled body. Lowering his lips to hers, he embraced her, feeling her firm flesh beneath the green gossamer gown she wore. He had known many women, both bawdy and virtuous. Although she acted the aggressor, she did not seem experienced.

Breaking from her kiss, he whispered, "We are expected at dinner. I won't betray my host without just cause. If and when I am convinced your circumstances are as you say, then I shall help you."

* * *

Wearing a long dark blue robe adorned with symbols of the zodiac, Harlock sat at the head of the banquet table. Gwyneth was seated at his left. Balin occupied the place of honour at his host's right. No others joined them at the immense banquet table.

Servants brought in roast venison, lentil soup, pastries, baked carrots, roasted potatoes, and hot fresh loaves. A heavy-set serving wench filled their pewter tankards with mead. While pouring a round for Harlock, she accidentally spilled some onto the sleeve of his robe.

"Oh!" she gasped. "A thousand pardons, M'lord." He pushed her away before she could wipe the wet spot with a greasy rag.

After exchanging toasts Harlock said, "Tell me, Sir Balin. Is it not true you are also known as the Knight of the Two Swords?"

"I am."

"And did not your second sword come from the Lady Lyle of Avalon, who caused the death of your parents?"

"It did."

"To avenge them, you cut off her head, didn't you?"

"All true. I am impressed that such knowledge has spread as far as Castle Kite."

Harlock slammed his tankard down on the table top, causing foam to slosh out. "Lady Lyle was my sister." His face took on a demonic expression as he added, "It was no accident you came here. I wanted to see who killed her. You were drawn here by my will. You appear to be a warrior of honour and virtue. I will not break the laws of hospitality to harm you, so long as you obey them as well. While you are my guest, you must respect me and what is mine."

"I intend to, M'lord."

Turning toward Gwyneth, the wizard said, "You wish to escape from here. Do not be so foolish. There is no place you could go. And away from here, you would have no existence!"

Her eyes grew even wider and she trembled as he spoke. With a look of fear and loathing, she returned her father's gaze.

Turning back to Balin, Harlock said, "Observe my powers, knight." The sorcerer raised his right hand and pointed toward the heavyset wench, waddling toward the kitchen to refill her pitcher.

She barely had time to look over her shoulder. "No, Master, please," she

begged.

Blue lightning arced from the wizard's forefinger and struck the fat woman in the small of her back. The servant disappeared in a puff of sulfurous yellow smoke. When it quickly dissipated, in her place, standing on all fours, was a mature sow, which squealed and trotted away.

Harlock laughed, but stopped when he saw that his daughter and guest did not join in. In a sombre tone he asked, "You did not find the wench's punishment fitting?"

Balin held his tongue, except to say, "I was impressed with your prowess."

"I grow tired," the wizard declared. "Let us bed down for the night." He looked past Balin to Gwyneth. She lowered her head, rose from the table, curtsied to the knight, then to her father, and ascended the stairs.

Harlock accompanied Balin to the door of his room. As Balin opened it to enter, Harlock laid a firm hand on the young knight's shoulder and fixed his guest with a steely glare. "Take care, young man," he cautioned. "Mine is a realm of magic. It extends far beyond your five senses. What you think you perceive may not be real. For your own safety, remain in your room until dawn. That is the only way I can assure your well-being."

Balin pondered his host's warning. "I shall follow your directive, unless my sword forces me to disobey it." He grasped the gold-inlaid handle and drew his finely-crafted blade halfway out of its scabbard to show the wizard what exquisite craftsmanship had fashioned it and what a formidable weapon it indeed was.

The wizard nodded in appreciation. "Good night, Sir Balin."

* * *

Sometime after midnight, Balin felt the snuggling warmth of Gwyneth's lithe, naked body pressing against his own. Her sweet mouth covered his with kisses as she pressed her supple, maidenly curves against him. "Make me a woman, now," she pleaded.

His own raging arousal demanded he yield to her wishes.

Afterward, his heart racing, he held her in his arms. The moon glowed in her eyes as she spoke. "Take me away from here, I beg of you. I shall love and serve you all my days if you only grant me this."

When she placed another soul-searing kiss on his lips, he could refuse her nothing. "Dress yourself and we shall slip away together." He donned his armour.

Careful to make as little noise as possible, they descended the spiral stairs. They were almost to the great door when Harlock's voice boomed, "So, this is how you would repay my hospitality?" A ball of brilliant blue fire materialized in his raised left hand. He hurled the ignited globe toward Balin, who deflected it with his shield.

Sparks flew in all directions, except where the shield protected them. Balin wondered if the Cross of Northumberland he bore for his heraldic device

helped fend off the power of the magic volley.

"Leave now, knight," the wizard shouted, "and I shall spare you, but you must relinquish my only child."

Clutching Balin's left arm behind his shield, Gwyneth pleaded in whispers to her champion, "I must go with you. If I remained, his punishment would be worse than anything you could imagine. He has no mercy for those who betray him."

Balin moved toward the door and opened it. They hurried through to the courtyard. His steed True stood waiting, fully saddled in full armament with Balin's knightly horse trappings. Between them and Balin's steed stood Roderick, the lackey, dressed in the armour of a foot-soldier and bearing a menacing-looking long pike.

Harlock came through the castle doorway after them. In an angry voice, he cautioned, "I have given you fair warning, Sir Balin. This is your last chance. If you do not heed it, you will rue your folly."

Through clenched teeth, the young knight replied, "She has chosen to leave with me. Tell your man to stand aside or he will rue his refusal."

Roderick charged with his pike. Though he was fast, Balin was faster. The knight sidestepped the pikeman's rush and slashed his arm in an effort to disable him.

When the foot-soldier dropped his pike and howled in pain, the wizard hurled a bolt of blue energy at him. When it hit, Roderick exploded in a cloud of yellow smoke. A moment later the cloud cleared. Where the man had been before there was a great black bear with sharp teeth and claws, all exposed, threatening Sir Balin.

Handing his shield to Gwyneth to protect them from whatever else her father might hurl, Balin grasped his battle sword with both hands and lunged at the bear, forcing it to back away. Subdued for but an instant, the brute raised on its hind legs and rushed Balin. The knight stood his ground and thrust his blade with all his might into the centre of the bear's chest.

The great bear halted. Blood spurted from its chest and came gurgling in a frothy red foam from its mouth. With a final bellow, it collapsed. Dying, its body returned to the human form of Roderick's corpse.

Balin untethered and mounted his steed. With his left arm he pulled Gwyneth up and onto the back of his saddle. Someone had already raised the portcullis, but the drawbridge had not been lowered. Balin trotted to the gateway and found the heavy rope that controlled the drawbridge. With a slash of his sword he severed the coil and the drawbridge crashed down. He spurred True onward and they rode out of Castle Kite.

From behind them the wizard's voice boomed, "You shall be sorry!"

Once over the bridge, the road seemed a pale ribbon in the moonlight, an easy path over which to escape. Then the ground in front of them began to move. Like some obscene crop springing from the earth, corpses in armour rose, brandishing swords, battle axes, mace-and-flails.

Balin's fighting blood was up. "What blasphemy is this?" he demanded.

Outraged at this latest form of necromancy, he handed the reins to Gwyneth and drew his second sword. Brandishing one in each hand, his weapons became a whirlwind of destruction as he hacked their way through troops of the undead.

Clinging to him, Gwyneth explained. "Those are all my champions who tried to rescue me before you came. All failed."

In a frenzy of slashing, Balin severed asunder his attackers until the last one fell. Nearly winded, he smiled to his new lady and said, "I did not fail you." He sheathed his swords and took back the reins.

With a thunderous explosion, Harlock materialized a hundred yards in front of them. "Your trial is not over," he gloated. Spreading the sleeves of his wizard's robe, he seemed to grow to twice human size. His hooked nose became a pointed beak; his dark robe became black feathers; his spread arms turned into huge wings; his legs sprouted razor-sharp talons at their base. He had become a giant vulture. In a voice that was more a shriek, he proclaimed, "In the land of carrion, the kite is king!"

True whinnied and almost reared up, but for Balin's control, as the giant bird rose to the sky. It passed in front of the moon, then arced and drove straight at them.

Balin pulled Gwyneth with him off their mount a second before the giant talons clutched upon empty air above the saddle in the place where they had been. He hit the ground, absorbing the impact to protect her. She kissed him quickly, then said, "You must slay him now before he kills us. Like the bear, go for his heart."

For her own protection, he pushed her into a ditch beside the road, so he could make his stand. "Stay down," he ordered.

The giant vulture arced once more and began its dive for the knight. Balin crouched and pointed his sword, waiting for the huge bird of prey to come. At the last second, he lurched backward and brought the sword up with both hands. It pierced the kite's breast and found its mark, sinking into the monster's heart.

The blade embedded in its chest, the great bird, carried by its own momentum, flapped upward for a moment, then crashed to earth. It transformed back into the body of Harlock.

Elated, Balin drew his bloody sword from the dead wizard's body and shouted, "He's dead. You're free, Gwyneth!"

However, as he turned and looked into the ditch, his jubilation abruptly faded. For, instead of the beautiful maiden who had promised him undying love, he saw the skeletal corpse of a female so long dead that it and the remnants of the once-fine gown that covered it were already rapidly disintegrating.

"Now, Gwyneth," he muttered, "you are free."

SHELLOCK THE WISE

Dane J. Lalonde

Shellock knew this wasn't going to be his day. The small orc scuttled across the rocky ground, taking cover in a thorny bush growing between the sloria trees. Jurlar, most magnificent ruler, and slayer of almost all who dare oppose him, had sent him on this grim task.

Well, it wasn't actually Jurlar who had sent him, not directly, anyway. Taskmaster Lek, a larger, smellier orc than Shellock, had given Shellock the assignment. Master Disciplinist Brull had ordered Lek to do it following a meeting with Jurlar. In this meeting, Jurlar gave the order to Brull: obtain the unconditional surrender of the humans.

That was it. No ifs, ands or buts. The humans would surrender, so ordered Jurlar. According to traditional orcish ways, crappy assignments flowed downhill. The biggest and meanest made the rules because, well, they were big and mean. Shellock was small, even for an orc, so it was logical he would eventually get the order.

Now everyone knew the humans were not going to surrender. Jurlar, the magnificent one, probably really believed, in all his orcish wisdom, the humans would withdraw if he demanded it. Everyone but Jurlar, crusher of heads, knew different. So Brull, on hearing his great leader's proclamation, decided promptly to pass it on to the next smallest in command, Lek. And in keeping with Brull's example, Lek gave it to Shellock. He laughed as Shellock left to obey. Even the really dumb orcs, the ones who drooled non-stop and had trouble understanding their own language, understood. Whoever went to the humans with this silly demand would be killed.

Right now, Shellock worried he wouldn't even make it that far. The outer compound of the human encampment was guarded heavily by warriors, and the strange four-legged, howling beasts. Dawgs, he thought they were called by the humans. One day, after his patrol was ambushed, he hid under a pile of bodies and overheard two humans discussing them.

This was one of his little secrets. He could speak the human tongue. Jurlar, basher of those who did not listen, did not care who went, or if they could speak with the humans. This was not his problem. He only wanted the message delivered so he could add "conqueror of the humans" to his list of esteemed titles. The fact no one could deliver the message was lost on him.

Shellock's brain worked on the problem he faced. Usually a liability, his intelligence could prove to be his salvation today. If the leaders knew he had so many thoughts and ideas, they would probably kill him. Smart orcs weren't very useful at bashing enemies. He peered out from behind his spot, and came face to face with a horrible, drooling creature of teeth and growls.

A human, tall and dark, cocked his spear back. The animal, a dawg most likely, snapped and pulled at the chain holding him.

"You don't want to do that," Shellock said casually. He crossed his arms

in front of him, trying hard to look bored in the face of the drooling dawg.

The human, stunned at hearing human speech from the little orc, paused. "Why not?" he asked finally.

Shellock looked annoyed. "I need to see your leader."

The human laughed. "For what?"

"Look," said Shellock. "I don't have time to play with an underling such as yourself. I need to see your leader, and I need to see him now. You can either take me to him, or direct me to someone who will."

Stunned, the human closed his open mouth and reigned in his beast. "This way," he nodded for Shellock to take the lead.

"Very well," he replied.

The human encampment was truly awe inspiring. It was well constructed and extremely well organized. Human men and women hurried about their assigned tasks. Shellock noted everything.

He was guided to a large central tent guarded by several armed and armoured humans. Their eyes widened. Surprised to see a live orc, they looked to their companion for an explanation.

"We need to see Miraan," he stated.

"What in the seven hells are you doing? Why didn't you just kill the foul beast? We don't need live ones, for gods' sakes."

The human started to reply, but Shellock took the lead. "You are who?"

Stammering, the man struggled to reply. "I, I, what..."

"Let me help you. You're the one who's holding me up. I need to see Miraan. Kindly announce my arrival."

The humans looked at each other for guidance. Several shrugged their shoulders, and some laughed nervously. "Who shall I announce?" he finally asked.

Rolling his eyes, Shellock looked skyward, as if asking the gods for patience. "Shellock," he began, "Shellock, master of the human tongue, diplomat of the orcs, maker of peace with the humans." He hoped it sounded impressive.

He entered the tent, and a nervous silence ensued. The humans only stared, and Shellock resisted the temptation to rock nervously on his feet. He imagined himself as dinner for the dawg growling menacingly beside him. All that separated him from death was his mind, an experience he found unnerving.

The tent was cool, and his eyes struggled to adjust to the darkness. Sun blots clouded his vision. He paused, pulling down on his ratty clothing. Sweat beaded on his forehead. Before him was a table on which sat a model of the surrounding terrain. Carved figures represented both sides.

Several men and women were gathered around it, one of them reclining in a simple chair, a glass in his hand.

Shellock stepped boldly forward. "You are Miraan?"

The human nodded.

"Leader of the humans?"

The man smirked, and Shellock cursed himself. Such a stupid question revealed his nervousness. Gathering himself, he continued. "I am Shellock of the orcs. I have come to discuss the terms of our peace agreement."

"Really?" The man stroked his chin, his eyebrow cocked. "How is it you come to speak our language?"

"I know things others do not. I read the books others would only burn. Ideas just come to me."

"So, you are not the leader of the orcs then?"

"I," Sherlock paused. He could tell he was losing the momentum. Control was slipping away from him. "I speak for Jurlar, wielder of the great club, leader of the orcs."

"So Jurlar wants peace with us?"

"He desires an end to the war," Sherlock said truthfully.

"A peaceful end?"

"An end," Sherlock repeated.

The human laughed now, and Sherlock looked at the others. They whispered among themselves. Anger began to cloud his thoughts. They were making fun of him.

"Now, then," Miraan silenced his people with a look, "we don't mean any disrespect, Sherlock of the orcs." He stopped laughing, and stood. "Come we must talk openly." Embarrassed at losing his composure, he followed Miraan quietly to the back of the tent. Taking an offered chair, he leaned forward.

"See this through my eyes," the human began. "A lone orc comes to my compound, speaking our tongue, and talking of peace. Now," he looked Sherlock deep in the eyes, "I truly mean no disrespect to you, but everything we know of orcs would suggest they are stupid, brutish beasts who do not understand the concept of peace. You see why this is hard to accept."

Nodding, Sherlock began. "Most of this is true. I am not like the others, though. I know things. I am smart. Probably," he looked embarrassed, "I am stupid compared to you, but to my kind I would be a great wise one, if we still had such things."

"Please," the human waved at him, "do not be so hard on yourself. That you came this far tells me much. You once had wise ones?"

"Yes, but Krgar, the one who died horribly at the hand of Jurlar, killed them. He said thoughts were bad."

"So, I can assume you were not sent here to offer peace?"

"Not exactly," Sherlock said.

"What was it you were sent here for?"

He looked nervously from side to side. His life depended on the next few moments. "That's not important now. I can offer you peace."

"And how do you propose to do that?"

"I'll kill Jurlar." The words came before there was time to think them over. Now they were out. It sounded simple. Jurlar, kill, I, and will. Simple words when put together were, well, impossible to carry out. He slumped in his chair.

Miraan seemed to understand his dilemma. "What if I offered to help you with this task? Would you really be able to control the orcs and offer a lasting peace with our people?"

Sherlock thought for a moment. A plan began to formulate in his mind.



"I think I can, yes."

"Good, then let's prepare you with what you'll need, and then talk of our agreement."

* * *

Shellock walked from the human compound, escorted by the same man who'd brought him in. He departed in silence, set in his grim task. The dagger Miraan's wizards had enchanted was secured to his forearm. He hoped this would work.

He strode confidently back to his own lines, enjoying the gaping mouths that greeted him. No one expected the small, spindly orc to return, and Shellock enjoyed the dismayed looks of grudging respect. He went directly to the tent of Jurlar, the one who beat the undisciplined, knowing full well Lek would take all the credit were he to see him first.

Waving the guards out of the way, he entered. "Jurlar," he called out confidently, perhaps a little too confidently. "Magnificent one, I have returned from my assignment to the humans. Your message has been delivered. I have your reply."

"Well," Brull began, only to be interrupted by Lek.

"This is the grunt I chose especially to deliver your message, great one. See what good judgement I have?"

"Yes, yes," their leader waved impatiently. "Come forward then, peon, and tell me of the humans' reply."

Shellock approached, and he could feel the dagger beginning to pulsate against his arm. The heat became uncomfortable. As instructed he pointed to the target, palm up, and triggered the command. "Jurlar!" he yelled.

The dagger broke free of the feeble straps holding it and streaked towards the fat, dirty orc seated in the chair of power. The dagger flashed as it struck him, burying itself hilt deep into his massive bulk. Jurlar looked at Shellock, then down to the dagger. A frown creased his leathery face.

"Good bye," Shellock intoned. The dagger exploded, its magical energy tearing Jurlar apart. Sticky green and red blood covered them all. Rushing up to the chair, Shellock grabbed the staff of rule, and uttered words he never thought would pass his lips.

"From this day forward let it be known that Shellock, slayer of Jurlar, now rules the orcs."

The others could not believe what they had just witnessed. They began to talk loudly among themselves, arguing over the situation. Hands strayed to weapons. Leaders ruled through fear and might, and, quite frankly, no one feared Shellock at all. His life would be measured in seconds if the next part of his plan failed.

"My first decree as ruler of you all is this: it is now orcish law that anyone who kills the ruler will be put to death immediately."

This sent them into a mass frenzy of confusion and debate. Arguing

loudly, they struggled to understand the implications of what Sherlock, new ruler of them all, had just ordered. He smiled.

The debate carried on for hours, but in the end it was determined that the new law must stand. No one could kill Sherlock without being put to death. He was leader until he decided otherwise, and named someone to take his place. The impact on their way of life would be enormous.

When everything had settled and Sherlock sat on the chair of rule, he thought it grand that he knew things others did not. Not only had he survived the impossible task given to him by Lek, former taskmaster, and newly appointed latrine cleaner, but there now existed an opportunity for him to usher his people into a new era.

Life was good. It was turning out to be his day, after all.

"And from now on," he commanded, "I will be known only as Sherlock the Wise." All those other appellations did sound kind of silly.

THE DRAGON ON THE ROOF

Edward F. Stack

When the man materialized Feneel gasped, clutching at her chest. Then she quickly collected herself and began muttering cantrips, preparing for what might come.

"Sorry, sweetheart." Trinil regretted startling her with his teleportation into their bedroom. Feneel was still half asleep and it was with unfocused but fiery blue eyes that she regarded her husband. Even in that state she could not help but notice how handsome he still was, his dark brown hair and close-cropped beard offset by his long robes, themselves the colour of the rising sun.

"What is it, Sweetheart?" She took a couple of deep breaths, her hand resting on her still rapidly beating heart. Her long black hair hung down her back, its few grey streaks mirroring those of Trinil. "I hope you have a good excuse for this. You know how much I hate it when you do that."

"Quite, my dear." Trinil smiled with self-reproach. "I am sorry to have upset you." So saying, he ambled over beside the bed and sat down next to his wife. He was still smiling and his green eyes sparkled. "I was just wondering if you had ordered a dragon?"

"Ordered it to do what?" Feneel shook herself fully awake. She did not like being toyed with by her husband.

"No, not ordered a dragon," Trinil laughed. "I mean did you order a dragon. To be delivered. Here. This morning."

"Of course not!" Putting on her most indignant face, Feneel got out of bed and strode across the room to the large wooden armoire beside the crackling fireplace. She pulled on full-length robes of a deep-sea blue before turning back to Trinil. "Do you really think that I would buy something like that without discussing it with you first?"

"Well..." The look on her husband's face irritated Feneel, but not for long. It was a look she had seen more than once in the past, and not always without its justification. Not this time, however.

She listened as he went on. "It is just that there is one here, and I know I didn't send for it."

"What do you mean, one here? A dragon, here? Where?"

"I mean here. At the castle." Trinil raised his eyes to the ceiling. "More specifically, on the roof. It interrupted my morning meditation."

"There is a dragon on the roof of the castle?" Some of sleep's cobwebs still clouding her mind, Feneel was still not ready to accept what her husband was saying.

"Well, not so much on the roof of the place as wrapped around it."

"Wrapped around the castle? Feneel felt her heart begin to speed up again. "I take it the creature is quite large?"

"Quite large indeed." Nodding, Trinil glanced out the window at a large patch of scaly hide. "In fact, quite large does not really do it justice."

Feneel followed Trinil's look. "Is it hostile?" She began searching through her wand case. What would be most appropriate?

Coughing, Trinil spoke confidently, "Given the beast's immense size and the fact that it has wrapped itself around our home but not yet torn it apart, I suspect it has some reason for being here not directly related to our destruction." He casually brushed some dust off his robes. As confident as he sounded now, his departure from the roof had been conducted in a spirit of considerably less aplomb.

Feneel, embarrassed by her earlier fears, straightened herself up. "Then I suppose we ought to go see what it wants."

"I think I know what it wants." A heavy sigh escaped Trinil. "Or at least why it is here."

Recognizing the sound Trinil had made, Feneel raised her eyebrows. "Creightean?"

Trinil nodded. "Creightean. It has to be his doing."

"Creightean!" Having donned her working robes, Feneel was already out the door and heading down the hall, calling as she went. "Creightean!" She stopped outside the second door on the right, pounding on it for a moment before flinging it open.

Inside was the chamber of a wizard-in-training. There was a workbench littered with bottles, tubes, flasks, vials, and various and sundry other items. There was a large bookcase with numerous ancient and valuable magical tomes, as well as some more recent books dealing with less weighty subjects. The buxom and scantily clad women on the dust jackets of these latter texts gave lie to the adage that one cannot tell a book by its cover. There was also a cold fireplace beside an empty bed.

What there was not was Creightean.

"As I suspected." Trinil glanced over his wife's shoulder.

"Yes. You were right." Feneel started moving down the hallway again,

bumping Trinil out of her way. "I suppose that makes you feel good."

"Sweetheart, you know this sort of thing upsets me as much as you."
Trinil strode after his rapidly disappearing wife.

He caught up with her at the bottom of the main tower. When they had climbed to the top they stepped out onto the platform and found themselves face-to-face with an extremely large dragon.

It was a beautiful creature, as wyrms go. Wings of shimmering aquamarine sprouted from a dark green body. A sparkling crest of gold started between the beast's eyes, running along its back to the tip of its nervously flicking tail. Its head was the size of a siege-tower, and its bared fangs were easily as long as a man is tall.

Despite its enormous size, its amber eyes, centred with coal-black pupils, glanced at Feneel for only an instant, then turned away before meeting her gaze.

Feneel suddenly understood. "Creightean?"

The dragon once again met the woman's gaze for a fleeting moment before finding itself looking elsewhere. Then it spoke in a voice that was still Creightean's. "Yes, Mother."

"Creightean."

"Yes, Father?"

"Well?"

"Father?"

"Don't play the fool with me, boy." Trinil's voice left no room for argument. "What have you done now? Was it cards, dice, a dare? Well?"

"I don't care what it was." Feneel stepped up beside her husband. "We have to change him back. We..."

"Wait." Trinil gave his wife a look she knew and understood. Reasonable at all times, he rarely interrupted her. When he did, she knew it was best to hear him out before arguing with him.

Knowing that she understood, Trinil turned back to his son, "Well?"

Seeing a look of such contrition on so large and fierce a face almost brought a smile to Trinil's face, but he simply stood his ground, tapping his foot impatiently.

Finally Creightean spoke. "It was a dare. I did it, but now I can't change back."

"I'm not surprised." Trinil looked at the massive creature which was his son. "Having become a dragon you are now subject to dragon magic, not human. And we have not trained you in this yet." He gestured at his son. "We had good reason not to, as you can see."

"Yes, Father, I understand. I'm sorry. Can you change me back now?"

"No."

"What?"

"I said no." Trinil looked deep into his son's eyes. "You got yourself into this. Now you must get yourself out."

"But how?" Creightean licked his lips.

Such a gesture would normally strike terror in humans, but Trinil saw

it as the nervousness and fear he was hoping to inspire in his son. "You are a dragon now. You must fly to the Dragon Council and submit your case for their judgement."

Creightean's eyes widened and Feneel gasped. She turned to her husband. "Trinil. No. You cannot insist that he make such a journey. He is just a boy."

"He is not a boy." Trinil took his wife's hands in his. "His boyhood passed some time ago, my love. He is now by years a young man." He smiled at her, his love for both her and their son was clear in his eyes. "It is only in the way that we treat him that he is still a child."

Feneel opened her mouth to argue. Then she paused, regarding the dragon. The creature was certainly of mature size, full-grown and well-formed. In her mind's eye she saw her son, and knew that her husband spoke the truth. But still...

"Perhaps what you say is not entirely inaccurate. But what has it to do with our helping him out in this matter?"

Trinil saw the light in his wife's eyes. "It has to do with the times before and the times to come. Will he still come to us like this when we are ancient and he is old?"

He turned and pointed at Creightean as he spoke to Feneel. "Will you expend the enormous power changing him back will require? Will you stand before the Dragon Council and explain, as someone must."

Trinil's voice was sad, but determined. He shook his head, answering his own question. "I know that I will not." Holding Feneel's hands tight, he said, "This time he is on his own."

"And if I will do what you will not?" Feneel's heart was breaking. She feared what might come of her son's journey to the Dragon Council.

"My Love," Trinil still held her hands, and her eyes. "It is not in our relationship for me to forbid you to act as you feel you must. All I ask is that you think about it."

With that Trinil released Feneel's hands, bade god's-speed to Creightean, and headed for the tower.

Behind him Creightean pleaded, "But Father!"

Without breaking stride, Trinil continued on his way to the tower entrance. Just as he reached the door he heard a plea which almost, but not quite, changed his mind.

"Dad? Daddy?"

His heart heavy but his mind sure, Trinil entered the tower and made his way downstairs. Feneel remained on the roof.

Trinil waited for her just outside the diningroom. When she came she did not speak to him, but went straight into the diningroom.

Waiting there to greet them was Wilyeems. He addressed himself to Feneel. At that Trinil smiled to himself. The old butler must have heard everything.

"Will Master Creightean be joining us for breakfast, Madam?"

Holding her head high, Feneel brushed past Wilyeems, saying, "No. Trinil and I will be dining alone for the next few days. Master Creightean has business of his own that he must see to."

Trinil looked at Wilyeems. Both men were smiling, but neither dared let Feneel know it. There would be time for that. Later. When it was right.

TROLL TREASURE

Frida Westford

A troll! Alfdis had not even believed in them. Now she thought furiously how to deal with the huge foul-smelling shape emerging from the darkness of the cave before her.

"We're looking for a missing crewman; have you seen him?" Asking could not make things worse.

"Captain!" Orn's voice sounded small from the cave's shadows.

Alfdis could not see him behind the dark mass of his captor. They had beached their ship below this cliff when they had been blown into this inlet the night before. At dawn, she had sent Orn, the youngest of her crew, for driftwood for a cooking fire. He had not returned, so she and Eirek had followed the boy's footprints to this hole in the beach cliff. Three of their shipmates had stayed to watch the ship. Now she wished they were here.

"Want man!" growled the troll. It hefted what had to be a large, heavy club against which Eirek's sword and Alfdis's knife would not be too much use. At least it understood speech.

"I can't let you have one of my crew." Alfdis tried to keep her voice from shaking. "If you're hungry, we'll help you hunt before we leave." She hoped the creature ate other kinds of meat.

As the troll advanced on the two humans, its full ugliness was revealed in the light from the cave mouth. Shaggy, matted hair did not hide enough of a warty face with yellow eyes, bulbous nose and gaping, gap-toothed maw. The body was nearly as wide as it was tall and Alfdis could see long dugs hanging from the chest.

"Not eat!" said the troll wife plaintively. Alfdis was caught between laughter and horror. At sixteen, Orn was eager to find his first girl, but not a lonely, love-starved monster.

"Get me out of here!" yelled Orn. "I'm too young to die!"

"The one you've caught is still a boy," Alfdis told her. "He's in my keeping." Time enough for Orn to remind her that she was only three years older than he.



The troll wife reached out to touch Eirek but was warded off by half a man's length of steel. "Trade," she said, looking back to Alfdís. Eirek made a wordless sound of disgust, shaking his grizzled head.

Then he looked over his shoulder to the sky behind them and significantly back to his captain. Alfdís guessed what he must be thinking. Sunlight would soon reach the ledge they stood on. If they could keep the creature talking until the rays struck her, and if she were a night troll, they would be rid of her. The gods tricked trolls that way in old tales; were real trolls that stupid? Even if they were, Alfdís was beginning to feel a bit sorry for this one. And besides she had offered to trade, something Alfdís did very well, when she had something to trade with. Here and now she had little.

"My name is Alfdís Gunnar's daughter. I'm sometimes called Cat. What do they call you?"

"Me called Grella," came the reply.

"Well, I cannot trade my crewman, Grella. Besides, if the boy is too young, this one," Alfdís pointed to Eirek, "is too old and set in his ways. You wouldn't be happy. Think of something else."

Sunlight struck the would-be rescuers at that moment. The troll wife showed no signs of retreating into her cave. She just stared at Eirek's gleaming blade.

"Do you like gold?" asked Alfdís. Trolls were known for gathering treasure hoards. She doubted her small finger ring would be enough.

"Got lots of yellow stuff. Want pretty white stuff." Grella pointed a claw at the heavy silver arm ring gleaming on Eirek's sword arm.

"Give it to her," ordered Alfdís. Eirek lowered his sword and worked the ring over his hand and down the sword to the point and held it out to Grella.

The troll wife pulled it off and held it gently. It seemed too dull in her hand. She looked up annoyed. "Pretty stuff get all black when me have it. Want good sil'er, stay pretty; not cheat!"

Alfdís and Eirek stared at each other. They knew that bracelet was made of the best silver. "Could be her breath," muttered Eirek. Alfdís thought he might well be right. How do you tell a troll her stench is ruining her play pretties?

"Here," said Alfdís, "I'll polish it for you. It must be the salt in the sea spray."

Grella looked puzzled or angry, it was hard to tell, but she handed the arm ring to the woman. Alfdís polished it on her linen undershirt, then on the soft leather of one of her gloves. She took the glove, wrapped the ring in it, and handed the bundle to the troll wife.

"Keep it wrapped up against the salt air," she instructed Grella. "Rub it gently (could the troll's huge hands be gentle?) when it needs polishing. Put it out in the sun when you want to see it shine but hold it in the leather. This may work with your other silver treasures too."

Grella slipped the glove down without touching the silver and grinned as she watched it gleam. She went into the cave and came back with a white-faced but unharmed Orn.

"Me let boy go if you promise come back with more sil'er or a man. Me even give you some yellow stuff." Kissing him enthusiastically, she released him. Orn looked about to pass out. He recovered enough to make a face, but stopped when his captain gave him a warning look.

"It may take some time," said Alfdis, "but I will come back."

"That all right; me trust Cat. You first human ever talk to Grella instead of try kill her. Besides," she confided as between women, "boy is a bit puny for me." She came out onto her ledge to see her guests off, heedless of the sun.

"I guess she's not a night troll," remarked Alfdis as the three walked down the beach toward their friends and their ship. "She's not so bad when you get to know her." She pretended to ignore Orn who graphically mimed throwing up. "She may be a useful trading contact."

THE GIFT

Ross G. Kouhi

I can still feel it against my skin. Tiny sand grains, each like a sharp edged crystal, and the colour of a tanned buck skin. Once the blowing sand stung me like the thorns of a thistle brush. Once the sand blew in my eyes and blinded my way. Now Hawk's wings blow away the sand from my face. Now the sand feels like a gentle caress from this land I have come to call my home.

This was not always my home. Hawk brought me here when I was just sixteen winters old. Hawk told me in a dream that we would go away. My father, Talks-to-Wind, told me I must listen to Hawk, because one's spirit guide knows what is best for him. My mother was crying when I awoke that morning. My mother, Swims-with-Loon, told me Hawk had come to her in her dream, flying with the Loon to tell her that I would be taken away that

day. Talks-to-Wind gave me his father's father's amulet of amethyst, and told me that I, Walks-Alone was his son. I knew that already, I thought. What a silly thing to say. I did not know what he meant until a long time later.

* * *

Our shaman was named Molongura. He was very old and the meaning of his name was not known by any of the elders, so it must have been in a tongue our people had forgotten. He was very good to me. He once told me that his name meant Knows-the-Sly-Sand-Dog. I once had the nerve to ask him why it did not just mean Knows-Fox, since that is surely the slyest dog we know. He told me that the sly sand dog is a spirit from a place far away.

He lived there as a boy and came to our people as a gift. He did not tell me this with a big head. He knew it to be true and so did we. He had been our medicine man for longer than anyone could remember. He did not look as we do,

and I had seen him sit in the moon light when the first snow was on the ground without the warmth of a good fur, and still he seemed to be comfortable.

His song to the moon is a very strange one, and it too must have been in his old tongue, I thought. No one knew what the words meant, and Molongura said that he too could not remember. Still, he made me learn it. I sing it to make myself happy, because the words sounded funny, and had sounds in them that we did not use in our tongue, or in any of the tongues of the Nations that bordered on our own. Hawk sang high and long over the great cliff that looked down on our summer village. I told my mother not to cry, and that I would not be gone long. If Hawk wanted to take me on a journey, I knew I would be safe. My father, Talks-to-Wind told me again I was his son, but that I would be gone forever from them, but the wind told him that I would be safe.

It made me sad to hear it. And the wind blew by, warm still in the late summer morning. It caught my hair, bringing it over my face. Everyone had come out of their wig-wams as I walked away that morning. I heard whispers and saw fingers point to Hawk, who seemed to circle impatiently, telling me it was time. Molongura, too, waited for me, but out where the path enters the tall birch trees, and the wind sounds like the river that runs from the hills. He gave me his special stick, wrapped in hide. He had always had it in a special place in his house, with the Shaman's tools.

I felt funny. It seemed almost like the festival time, with everyone out standing in the village. It felt like when the hunters had just brought back several moose and the feast was about to start. I had even been successful in the last hunt, and it had given me great pride. Today, I felt pride too, but I was not sure why.

Molongura told my mother she should be happy, because I had been chosen by the spirits. I walked alone into the forest, then, and as I did, I thought it funny to hear Molongura sing his moon song behind me, so strong and loud. I had never heard him sing it in the daytime before. I sang his words back strongly as I walked away from my home, and I never saw my parents again.

Loon swam along the shore with me as I walked past the edge of Speckle Fish Lake. The wind seemed to push me along as I started to climb Big Stag Hill. Soon, though, I was alone, and a final scree came from Hawk gliding high over head.

As I jogged down the winding path into the valley of the swampy river, in amongst the Tamaracks, I saw it in front of me. Hawk came closer to me than he ever had before, except in my vision when I was only twelve winters old. He sat on my arm without hurting me. His head turned this way and that; his green-black eyes darted about.

There stood a giant, flat wall before me. It looked like the surface of Speckle Fish Lake when a light breeze is rippling its surface. Hawk looked at me once more and flew straight into the wall of water.

I had put my hand into the wall, and it had felt like warm summer water in the brook that twisted its way through our summer village, warmed by the hot sun that shines during big-moon summer time, yet my hand was not wet when I pulled it back.

I looked around one last time, then stepped forward into the wall. I felt like I was almost on fire. I had to take off most of my skins, and carry them in my sack. It was a hot, terrible place I had come to. I could feel the burning of the sand through my moccasins. It was as hard to walk as when the snows lay deep between the pines. Now it seems strange to think back on that, as I can walk bare foot past that same spot now, just as easily as the people do, my people.

They found me there, still in the blowing sand of the hot morning. I had spent a freezing night in that same place huddled in my skins, visions of Hawk, and Loon and strange sand dogs with two heads running through my dreams. I wondered what kind of place this was that could be so hot under the sun, yet so cold under the moon.

My adopted people came to me then, not knowing me, nor I knowing them.

They took me into their strange houses in the caves of a rocky outcropping. I was very frightened, when I awoke in that place. I shivered under my skins, even though they had a fire built high. They, however, stood there in their small breech clouts, and did not seem cold at all with their bare bodies.

Their warriors held weapons ready, seeming to think that it was I who was strange, though they did not even speak the tongue of my home, or look as our people there did. They had round heads and flat wide noses and spoke in quiet, humming sounds. I realized as the heat from the fire warmed my bones, and I gained strength from the water and strange bread they fed me, that there was something familiar in them.

The warrior men took my bag from me, and unwrapped the bent-arm stick that Molongura had given me, and they all fell silent and whispered amongst themselves, pointing at me, as if arguing what to do. I was very frightened.

Soon, though, I saw the moon outside climbing slowly above the land, and it felt good to see something familiar. Hawk flew across the face of the moon as if to tell me what to do, and I began to fight my fear by singing Molongura's moon song, slowly at first, and then growing stronger.

As I found out later, that song had saved my life that night, and sealed my position with these my adopted people.

They say I was a gift from the spirits to them. They say that their old medicine man had told them I would come, but they did not know when. He had died almost a whole season before, and the people were frightened that they would not find a new medicine man, as none had been trained before his death. That is when I arrived.

Tonight I sing Molongura's moon song. I know what the words mean now, as it is in the tongue of these, my people. I teach it also to a young boy, Burangoo, who looks with wide eyes at the tools of their old Shaman. A mysterious old man I must be, from a far away place, where tall trees whisper in the wind, and loons twitter across large lakes of water. I keep the bent stick in my hand and I am wary of the sly sand dogs that sometimes creep into our village at night to steal what they can. I throw this stick expertly now, and it comes back to drop at my feet. I only scare the sand dogs, though I know I could easily kill

them as the others do. They laugh at me for doing so, but I will not change my way.

After all, Molongura would have wanted it that way.

AUGA'S LAY

I have northern wastes in
My heart, my mood and fate
Though my body dislikes
Winter cold. I am glad for
Fur, ale and fire's crackling

As we hearth-sit in mild
Moonlit night, I am put in mind
Of our true state on this earth.
Moon goes down,
Sun goes down, no one knows
Where they go but the gods, yet let
Me speak of flaming fire. Our lives
Are like the burning things;
They need fuel and blaze back night,
But Fate sits outside the light,
Never leaves. It knows our lives
Are in the end ashes.

Let us shine bright as an axe
Blade which hews our weak foes;
One lives but once beneath
Heaven's vault. Only a noble death
Takes us to Valhalla, fabled meadhall
Of Odin, Thor, Tyr, Heimdal and
All the rest. There the brave can
Forget the brief time we have on earth,
These shells doomed to burn, to lie
In barrows and rot but spirits continue...

I am set apart, not a bladesman
Or shield-wielder; my arm's power is
Not great but my name means "eye";
I wish with the sight of Odin's
Good eye. My earth is a misty place,
Mine paths of power but the might
Is not mine, given only by grace

Of our fathers in their hall.

To see is not always to have clarity.
Paths of power are like those of a good
Viking longboat in water; the prow
Splits the present with winds unseen
Main but the sea is not tracked forever.
It consumes the foam of our passage
In silent whale-fraught wisdom.
The keel is our plow; we till the sea
As we go viking.

The paths of power are lonely
And wild places, chill as a
Sunless deep where time's frost
Does not melt, a place of mist,
Dark deeds and thoughts.
It is a wolf's way; who leads the
Hunting pack but Odin's messengers?
The paths of power are like unseen
Rivers beneath the ice of our
Present world, there for the hearing
By those who choose to go that way.

I have chosen those travails,
Those deeps; in them one sees
Brief glimpses into the minds
Of terrible gods...

I am heartened by ale
And hale friendship around
This fire. The flesh is good,
Warm but my frame will eventually
Fall; then, if it is my doom,
No matter what my bane, I shall
Speak from stones of memory to my
Fellow plunderers; nothing but a man
Unafraid of dark, wild places;
Who dares tame the ways of gods?

Dwight E. Humphries

THE KING

The king rode forth on a charcoal horse
And laughed in the noonday sun
Someone must ride at the head of the tide
That breaks the evil bond.

The job of a king is a terrible thing
When he's true to his folk and his soul,
For tyranny and the hand of truth
Are as distant as garbage and gold.

The king danced a jig with a girl of thirteen
And wrestled with men half his age.
To win love from a throne you must give heart and soul
To honour and honest courage.

There's been many a chief and many a king
Whose deeds shone like a gem in the sun,
But to rule out of pride or a personal sting
Is the way of the tyrant and scum.

A benevolent dictator never was born,
But a leader who's worthy's a treasure;
Every calling we've got is a quest of the heart
For the peace born of truth in full measure.
Uncle River

RUNIC BARDS

T. William Carter is a member of an Ottawa writer's group. He writes often humorous science fiction, fantasy, novels, short stories, but he draws the line at poems.

Jeanny Driscoll heads the Marqui Underground in Natal, South Africa.

M.E. Duff has studied languages at the University of Toronto where she still resides.

Dwight E. Humphries is a poet from Georgia, USA.

Ross Kouhi of Ottawa has a degree in physics and manages a technology R & D group in a large telecommunications company. He writes fiction and non-fiction, including published essays on political and social issues.

David J. Lalonde of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan has been haunted by the muse for as long as he can remember, "*Shellock the Wise*" is his first story sale.

D.K. Latta is a writer residing in Kingston, Ontario.

Carl Mills of Ottawa is an editor of the poetry magazine, **YIELD**, and the leader of a writers' group in the nation's capital.

D. Sandy Nielsen of Brampton, Ontario, is an artist, mystery lover, owner of the cats, Thor and Loki, and the creator of Thorval and other splendid Viking characters.

Uncle River, editor of **XIZQUIL**, resides in the American Southwest.

Matthew Wayne Selznick is a bookseller living in Southern California. "*Trouble Day*", set in the Shaper World, is his first sale to a commercial publication.

Beecher Smith of Memphis, Tennessee has many varied credits, including having been Elvis Presley's lawyer.

Edward F. Stack has a background in history, anthropology and education. He has taught history in Africa, Canada and Latin America.

Kate Tompkins lives in Montreal with her husband and cat. This is the first (but she hopes not the last) time she's been paid for her writing.

Frida Westford of Bloomington, Indiana won the Mid Kingdom Laurel for poetry in 1996.

Orders and Submissions

Additional copies of Bardic Runes are available for \$4.00 each or by subscription for \$10.00 for three issues. Those living in Canada may pay in Canadian funds. Those living outside Canada should pay in US funds or equivalent. Cheques are to be made payable to Michael McKenny and sent to: 424 Cambridge St. S., Ottawa, ON, K1S 4H5, CANADA.

The Reader's Choice

The Readers of XIV chose:

At The Gate of the Sun

by

Ceri Jordan

as the best of that issue. Readers are invited to write the editorial address (see page 2) and cast their ballot. The winner will be announced in the following issue.

MICHAEL McKENNY
424 CAMBRIDGE ST. S.
OTTAWA ON
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April 23, 1997

Hi, Janet!

Here's the newest BARDIC
RUNES released earlier today,
notwithstanding the typo on page 2.
I hope it provides you with much
enjoyable reading.

It'd be great to hear your
choice for favourite story (esp. 60).

May this find you very well and
may that long continue.

Peace,
Michael